



Critiques: Discussing Students' Creative Visual Works-in-Progress

Joan Inderhees

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What is a Critique?

As a signature pedagogy of studio courses, a critique is a conversation in which the student presents their work to their instructor and peers for discussion and evaluation while the work is in development. It is centered on formative feedback (a “feed-forward” dialogue) to inform and guide the way the student advances their work, not just reflecting and analyzing what has been created thus far (Race). Many prefer to use the shortened “crit” to emphasize their informal, ungraded, and often free-form structure.

Crits for production studio courses (architecture, fashion, visual communication design, and most art media) will differ with those in performance studio courses (theatre, dance, performance/time-based art, music). Additionally, there are longstanding critique practices specific to each discipline. Still, some of these methods can be used by other disciplines. Nursing and health care, for example, use a similar pedagogy in their clinical courses.

Students in pre-professional degree programs in the arts will later create works that will be critiqued by employers and clients. Students need to learn how to present their work in a manner fitting the media and profession, to hear interpretations and respond to them, and to confidently participate in the verbal exchange of ideas. They are engaging in identity transformation – forming dual identities as both students and designers, simultaneously.

Though the goals, content, and frequency of critiques are tied to evaluation and assessment, neither is the specific subject of this document.

What is the Purpose of a Critique?

Formative critiques focus on purpose, technique, function, and expression.

Specifically, crits are used to:

- Review project specifics and learning objectives
 - Project briefs are often broadly written to allow for a range of student interpretations. Students often struggle with this inherent ambiguity, so crits provide a setting for clarification.
- Discuss the work's alignment with details in the project brief (created by the instructor or the student)
- Discuss the research, both subjective and objective
- Analyze and refine: technical skills, concept of the student's work, composition/formalistic aspects



- Guide the student through the ambiguity of creative practice (Orr & Shreeve)
- Conceptualize improving, expanding, redirecting student work
- Develop the student's critical thinking skills and self-reflection through conversation
- To enculture the student into the profession through conversation in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger)
- To challenge the proto artist/designer with the rigor of the profession (aka "the real world") and to blur the line between school and practice

Implementation

1. **Carefully craft the project description (or brief).** It provides a structure so students can anticipate what is expected of them, and defines spaces, ideas, and forms that are open for creative exploration. The brief serves as a foundation for critique of both the student's process and the product itself. Align your method and language to the learning objectives for the project.
2. **Plan the time.** There are 3 phases of a crit: recognition, acclimation, and analysis (Elkins). You will need time to simply look at the work, sort your thoughts, and to consider the limitations of the maquette, sketch, model, wall, lighting, print quality, etc. The analysis is most important, so get to it as soon as possible.
3. **Prepare yourself.** Be aware of your role in the crit. Determine if you are acting as a mentor leading the work, mentor in the middle of the creative process, discovering the solution alongside the student, or a coach. That role might be vague or be in direct contradiction of a project brief that might be ambiguous, anything-goes. Draw on your experience as a student, practitioner, and teacher.
4. **Define your standards.**
 - The skill and conceptual depth that aligns with the age and maturity of the student.
 - The broader context of creative works in the profession.
 - The broader context of social, cultural, and political environment
5. **Prepare your students.** The goal of a crit is to improve the work; it is a testing ground for ideas. Give guidelines for crits at the start of the semester. (Lieu)
Have a focus for the critique: media use, formalistic criteria, context, meaning, craftsmanship, and/or technique. Choose features that are visible from a reasonable distance that everyone in the class can grasp what is critiqued.

Critique Formats

Conduct crits in a variety of ways to align with learning objectives, time constraints, and to maintain student engagement throughout the semester.

1. Whole class

Everyone gets to see the work and be part of the discussion, but attention fatigue can diminish its effectiveness. Plan for regular breaks — at least a chance to stand and move around.

2. Small group

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Keeping small groups of 4–5 intact for a project will help students keep track of others' process. Biweekly class sessions can allow half of the students/groups to meet at length with the instructor while the other group has a work session.

3. Individual

Sometimes called “desk crits,” these also allow time for you to gauge the student’s design process, their reflection on their own work, and conceptual inquiry. If the work has significant errors or missteps, your feedback might be hard for the student to hear. Avoid adding public humiliation to a difficult conversation by using a private conversation. Incorporate individual crits into your routine so they don’t feel inherently threatening to your students. Invite students to individual crits after a large group session for more clarity.

4. Peer to peer

This is useful later in the semester or with advanced students who understand the media and project objectives. Provide a checklist for students to guide the conversation. Collect the checklists or photograph them so you can refer to them during the remainder of the project.

5. Guest expert

Invite professionals to talk about the student projects near or at the end of the project. Students can be part of small-group or individual conversations with the guest, or listen to a group of professionals converse about the work, letting it “speak for itself.” The group might also ask the student questions.

Critique Methods

Real-time questioning/providing meaningful comments. Avoid professional jargon, or explain it for clarity.

- “I see that you’re using [primary colors, a glass wall]. What are you trying to achieve by this?”
- “I can see that you have made decisions about _____. How does that apply elsewhere?”
- “The project brief states _____. What are you thinking about doing for that?”
- “At this point the work has/lacks____, so that’s the next thing to resolve. What are your thoughts?”
- Comments can be grouped into “This Time” and “Next Time”; or “Strengths” and “For Improvement” (Darby & Lang).
- Keep the “I like it” comments for the end, and back them up with tangible support.
- When there are negative comments, make sure students provide their reasons for them.
- Watch for times to take a break when tension is high.
- Use the “critique sandwich” of a challenging, negative comment that is preceded by an encouraging comment and followed by a positive observation.

Written crits:

- Give students post-it notes to write comments/question on their peers’ work.
- Take photos of the notes for your reference. Student can do the same thing.



- Give students 3–5 pushpins/tags/poker chips/wrapped candies to ‘vote’ for pieces that meet a specific criterion from the project brief. Students take notes about their reasoning, which helps get conversations going once the group discusses the work together.
- Students study their peers’ work for specific aspects

Cold reads:

The student does not talk about the work; they listen to others’ interpretation, questioning, and dialog. This helps students understand other’s viewpoints and consider if their intent was conveyed or not. (Lieu)

Student mini-presentations:

Person 1 speaks for a couple minutes about their work. Use a timer. Person 2 takes notes during their crit. Person 2 has their turn and is person 1 their note-taker.

Presentation teams:

Students present their work to one other person, explaining their reasoning, process, and concerns. Each student then presents their teammate’s work to the group. This is one way to avoid critiquing the best work in the class first.

Tag team:

The instructor chooses one project to critique first or choose a student (nearest birthday, wearing the same color shoes as the instructor, or another random detail). That student chooses the next one and starts off the critique with an observation and a question for the artist. This works if students can take notes about projects first; the student will have to shift their thinking to do this, so notes help. Keep track of time.

Speed-dating format:

Students move from one project to the next every few minutes in a predetermined order, adding comments and editing to those from the previous student reviewer. They do not directly interact with each other. This is useful near the project’s end when students are familiar with its details.

Self crits:

Students reflect on their process, research, experimentation, and the finished work when the assignment is done. This can be part of a design journal on paper, Google Drive, or the journal features in the LMS. Students could fill out a paper or digital grading rubric and submit it with their project.

Online Critiques

The online teaching environment means there is a loss of materiality and tacit experience for many creative media. In other cases, the online realm is a signature pedagogy for the media — photography, journalism, motion, game design, film. Based on your unit’s direction and your own knowledge and skills, use the university’s LMS or ask students for their preferences of online tools and apps.

Be aware that people are in a different mindset when they are at home/online and not in a classroom studio; we are competing for their attention.



Things to consider:

- Show your face at least part of the time! No need to dress up or write a script. Have notes on hand to stay focused on key points you want to address, but talk as you would during class time.
- Find ways to be flexible and still uphold the learning objectives of the project
- Use the scheduled class time.
- Hold much shorter crits for this setting. 30-45 minutes is optimal.
- Use the poll tool to get feedback.
- Use the responses accessed via the avatar (Blackboard's Collaborate Ultra) on the toolbar at the lower center of the shared screen area for quick ungraded responses that last under a minute.
- Be available for individual conversations for 10-15 minutes. Your voice is important.
- Send short emails. Not chatty. (TLDR: "Too long; didn't read.")
- About 4-6 students at a time for video calls
- Set up individual appointments for more effective crits in this setting
- Video Calls are not for showing videos; they require too much bandwidth. Share the link. Real-time and just-in-time phone/video conversations. Plan ahead for this. (Darby & Lang).

Frequently Asked Questions

a. *What should the other students be doing during the critiques?*

You may assign a task, such as a written crit, for students to do while you look at the work. Take notes about common successes, weaknesses, challenges. Consider sharing general observations with the class before discussing each work. Point out that "what I'm saying about this work applies to yours, too."

-Have students bring preliminary works to the crit for reference, too.

Students can:

- Use post-it notes to write comments/question on their peers' work.
- Use 3–5 pushpins/tags/poker chips/wrapped candies to 'vote' for pieces that meet a specific criteria from the project brief.
- Study their peers' work for specific aspects via a checklist

b. *How often should I conduct critiques?*

That depends upon the level of the course and project goals. Foundation-level students may need crits each session, while advanced students can have personal goals for each session but need a guided crit at phases through the project.

a. *At the start of the project.*

- Go over the project brief and allow plenty of time for questions. Show examples.
- If students are creating goals or direction for their work, meet again to discuss and refine them.

b. *Midway*

- Split class into small critique groups (less than 5) for the whole project for 1–2 works-in-progress (WIP) crits lasting about 30-minutes.

c. *A 'soft final' timed for 1-2 class sessions before it's due.*

- Look for things that need a tune-up. Give them talking points.



c. *How do I deal with the student who wants to talk a lot?*

Have all students write their comments on sticky notes for each project first. Let students read the notes on their own work so all of the students' ideas are heard. You can lead the crit based on those comments, inviting students to talk as needed.

You could also bring a jar of pennies, toothpicks, or another small item. Each student gets the same amount, returning one item to the jar when they speak.

d. *How do I deal with the student who is reluctant to talk?*

Assign students to comment on a particular work — their own, or someone else's. Give them a few questions/prompts to focus on. Allow a few minutes for them to think and take notes before beginning the conversation. Each interpretive statement should be backed up by specifics in the artwork. Ask very specific questions that have relatively obvious answers; they are 'low risk' for the introvert, and can make more complicated questions less scary.

e. *How do I make sure that I don't commandeer the conversation?*

Silence is okay — allow students time to think. Let them speak first, uninterrupted. Summarize what they said. Ask another student to share an observation, ask a question. You speak last.

f. *How do I make sure there is equitable crit time?*

Use the timer on your smart phone, a sand timer (hourglass). In small groups, ask one student to keep track of time.

g. *How do I deal with students who demand specifics — "just tell me what you want so I can get an A."*

The ambiguity of project briefs requires students to think and pay attention. The lack of clarity existing in ambiguity creates gaps where inquiry and creativity can occur.

Transparency is its antitheses, so provide some specifics for a productive ambiguity: a schedule, due dates, materials, priorities. That creates a structure for ambiguity to inhabit. (Orr & Shreeve)

h. *How do I make sure that I don't overprescribe the direction the student should go after the crit?*

Using the open-ended words and phrases to engage students in dialogue: "maybe..." "have you considered..." "what do you think of..." "have you looked at..." "how can you approach _____ differently"?

i. *How can I get students to take advantage of office hours for a private critique?*

Rebrand 'office hours' to 'stop-in time' to emphasize a casual, non-threatening tone.

Assign points for their course grade for having an outside-of-class conversation. Put it in your syllabus.

j. *How can I carve out more time for crits?*

- Create videos of all technique and craft instruction. It will be well worth your time. Students can replay your good, albeit amateur videos 24/7 for on-demand instruction that way, too.



- Have students use Adobe Spark to present their work— it has lots of creative tools. Embed text and weblinks. It's a fun software and easy to use.
- Use a shared Google Slides file. The instructor can share their screen and switch between students quickly, and all students can edit, comment the same file before and during the crit.
 1. Create a Google Slides template for critiques with a student's name on a slide in alphabetical order; allow them to edit it. Create a title slide with placeholder text.
 2. Place it in a folder on Drive and share the folder with your students.
 3. Copy the template and rename it for each project/week/phase of the project. Edit the title slide.
 4. Copy the link. Go to the project folder (keep references, readings, directions there) and create a Web Link for that slide deck.
 5. Prior to class, students should add photos (jpg format) of their work, making more slides as needed.Students can be assigned to type comments on each other's slide deck. This can be done asynchronously.

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