

Design critique

Design critique sessions and how to give as well as take critique in a good way

No design is perfect at the first go

Critique helps to improve design work

What is a design critique session?

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Mitch Goldstein
@mgoldst



School starts in a few weeks, so let's talk about critiques at design school, especially from the perspective of students. Critique — both giving and getting — is one of the most difficult aspects of design school, especially for new students. A few things to pay attention to:

06/08/2018, 03:03

What is a design critique session?



Mitch Goldstein @mgo... · 06/08/2018 ▾

First: you really have to understand that the purpose & value of a critique is to improve the work — critique serves the work, not the person who made the work. A critique of your work is not a critique of your humanity. Making bad work does not make you a bad person.

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What is a design critique session?

- Show what you have worked on and get input to improve your work.



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You should know **why** you are getting or giving a critique. Some crits are for exploring concepts, some are for finessing details, some are not even crits at all but are really celebrations at the end of a project. Know why the instructor is holding a crit and what the point is.



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What is a design critique session?

- Show what you have worked on and get input to improve your work.
- Feedback session tailored to the point in the process.



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- Show what you have worked on and get input to improve your work.
- Feedback session tailored to the point in the process.
- Different possible formats (group, one-on-one).
- People have specific roles: presenter, moderator, note-taker, critic(s).



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Giving a critique

- Ask clarifying questions first.
- Be kind and honest, but don't be nice.
- Be specific, be concrete, be constructive.
- Don't tear people apart.
- Pose your critique as questions.
- It's not about what you like or dislike; stay objective.
- Don't speak in absolutes.
- Sandwich construction (positive-negative-positive).



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You should always be kind instead of nice. A "nice" crit is telling someone their work is pretty good to avoid hurting their feelings. A "kind" crit is telling someone their work is not good so they know it needs to be changed. Be kind & honest, instead of nice & disingenuous.

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Couple of more things: I do not buy the idea of "harsh" critiques. You should not get "torn apart" in a crit. Crits should not be "brutal" — crits should be honest and useful. If you walk away feeling like garbage, it was not a useful crit. It was a belittling one.

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The issue with corrective crits is so often it leads to a direct duplication of that comment — and that is not the point of critique. A lot of design education is about trying stuff until you figure out what works. Being told the exact "right" answer does not let this happen.

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Receiving a critique (1)

- Come prepared.
- Frame the session; state goals for the session and the critique.
- Show, don't tell; Listen, don't talk.
- There is not one right answer; it's allowed to disagree.
- Ask what would satisfy the critic.
- Translate what your crit is saying.



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As a person getting a crit, you should be prepared to asked pointed, specific questions about your work — know what you want answers to, and be able to clearly ask questions that will get you those answers. Have a list with you. "What do you think?" is not a useful question.



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You have to decide what feedback you do & do not care about. Just because someone told you something, does not mean you have to act on it (including the instructor). Everything is up for interpretation — but note that ignoring what **everybody** says probably won't help your work.



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Receiving a critique (2)

- Be curious; ask questions you don't know the answer to.
- Don't wait, pull if you need feedback.
- Make sure you get actionable feedback.
- Take notes, or ask someone to do it for you.
- Don't take it personal.



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As the student you need to learn to *pull* what you need as opposed to waiting for what you need to be pushed onto you. Design school is about being active, not being passive. If you need more, go get it!

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Take! notes! during! your! crit! Or ask someone to take notes for you. Or, ask if it's OK to record the crit with your voice memos app if you don't like writing. You will (hopefully) get a lot of information thrown at you, and you need to think about it after you sit down.

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Also, you have to be able to *accept* critique without taking it personally, without getting heated, without getting defensive. You have to approach the crit process as if the feedback is real & truthful — not as if it's a personal attack.

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Ending a crit session

- Don't try to come up with answers.
- Agree on the takeaways.

It's a collaborative effort

- Critique sessions are a dialogue.
- Help each other to end up at actionable feedback.
- It's a skill which takes time to learn.



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Critique is one of the most valuable parts of a formal art & design education. It is a collaborative activity that takes quite a bit of time to learn — both how to give feedback and how to take feedback.

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What we will pay attention to

- Do you come prepared? – goals, specific questions
- Do you apply the guidelines of critique sessions?
- Do you (ask someone to) take notes?
- Do you argue for what feedback you have and have not used to improve your design?

Conclusions

- Critique sessions are meant to make a design better, not to criticise the designer as a person.
- Good critique is actionable.
- If you don't get what you need, keep asking.
- Record the crit session to get most out of it.
- It's a collaborative effort that takes practice.

Other resources

Moving from a critical review to critique – by Jared Spool

<https://www1.uie.com/brainsparks/2011/10/27/moving-from-critical-review-to-critique/>

How to Take Criticism by Chappell Ellison

<http://chappellellison.com/giving-and-taking-criticism>

How to run a UI design critique by Jason Teague

<https://www.smashingmagazine.com/author/jasoncranfordteague/>

Reviews of designs on [Dribbble](#) and [Reddit](#)