

A GLOSSARY OF USEFUL CRITIQUING TERMS

For writers new to a critique group, here are some terms you'll hear tossed around—more or less in the order of frequency you'll hear them tossed. After considering them, come back to this introductory paragraph and enjoy finding fault with it.

Wandering POV. The point of view shifts to another character, or to the author, when the piece has been, for instance, “third person, major character” throughout. “Omniscient” is a valid, though challenging POV; so is multi-character or “selective omniscient.” “First person,” though limiting, can be a good option. There are several others; but once you've chosen—it's usually best to stay within your choice.

Author intrusion. Henry Fielding, in the eighteenth century, made this work; so did his contemporary Tobias Smollett. But contemporary readers (usually) like to do their own thinking. “If Buck could have read the newspapers,” Jack London famously intruded on behalf of his canine hero, “he would have known that trouble was brewing.”

Echoes. A word or phrase occurring too close to its last use by the writer sets up an echo in the reader's ear. When Thomas Mann did this, it was considered leitmotiv; when we do it, it's usually an error caused by not rereading our own text.

Sentence variation. English is rich in potential sentence constructions; try a few besides “subject/verb/object.” You could be putting the reader to sleep. Hemingway liked to string short, pithy sentences together with conjunctions to achieve subtle contrasts, or wry meanings, or surprises. See *The Garden of Eden*, Chapter One; or the much earlier *The Sun Also Rises*.

Three (or two) legged table. It takes characters; a plot; a setting; a theme; and some say, the way you handle time—to make a story. Remarkably, some people get a long way into a story without one of these elements. Edgar Allen Poe, and much later, John W. Campbell each got away with characterless stories—once. “Plotless” stories have

enjoyed a long vogue in *The New Yorker*. But until you're ready for *New Yorker*—keep in mind these four (or five) basic elements.

Pacing. When a story drags, you can often tell; but not as soon as your readers. It's not a universal cure, but 99% of the problems of pacing respond to the following fix: Use dialogue to enliven a scene that drags as narrative; use narrative (e. g., indirect discourse) to speed up a scene that drags as dialogue; and as Elmore Leonard advises, “leave out the parts that readers skip.” A master of combining dialogue/indirect discourse to create engaging scenes was Dashiell Hammett. See *The Thin Man*, Chapter One.

Tone and mood. Tone is the writer's feeling and posture toward the work; mood is what the writer wants the reader to feel in a given scene. Tone should stay the same throughout; mood can change with every paragraph—or vary, or stay the same. Such absolute statements can start brawls, usually with English teachers; but watch out for tone (as defined here). If it strays, the writer might not be ready to deal with/write about something—right?

Vivid verbs. Use them—but with one notable exception: go on and use “said” rather than one of 156 possible euphemisms/synonyms for “said” unless you've got a really good reason. Try “verb runs” (circle them) in your rewrite process: look for the excess use of the verb “to be;” weak or inexact verbs; shopworn verbs. See Strunk and White's discussion in *Elements of Style*.

Showing vs. telling. Add vivid description to your new respect for vivid verbs; don't tell things as they're always told—especially about emotions. Employ senses besides the (exclusively) visual. See the last Scene of *Farewell to Arms*, and judge for yourself what Hemingway (and readers) got for his alleged thirty-nine rewrites.

Vagueness. What it means to you isn't always what it means to your reader. You can only by for precision—for the apt word—but at least, give your first draft a reading (aloud, it's suggested) to detect undesired effects.

Character gawking (a.k.a. “filtering”). Give the reader the up-front feel of sensory experience, not an unvarying account of a character’s perceptions. “Toby opened the shed and immediately smelled gasoline” is okay; “When Toby opened the shed, there was an immediate, acrid scent of gasoline” might be better.

Paragraph Division. Nonfiction’s “topic sentence/idea development/transition sentence” structure for paragraphs is pretty well known; less familiar is fiction’s principle of “unity of impression.” It’s very subjective, even instinctive; but we all have to learn what to leave out, what to leave in, and what to make a separate concern— —in accord with the effect/impression we want to achieve with the reader.

Critique group Fatwabs. Once in a while workshop facilitators just like to have. their own way about something—after, let’s say, hearing/seeing that something too often. There’s simply—no explaining these:

Fatwah #1. No more description of characters by means of facial expressions; or worse, characters exchanging facial expressions.

Fatwah #2. No more use of semicolons in dialogue. If the speaker pauses—or hiccups—use a dash.

Fatwah #3. Don’t use so many dashes. Everything starts sounding—breathless.