

How to Critique Creative Projects

The bottom line to filmmaking is this: A filmmaker makes a movie to engage with and communicate something to an audience, and the audience decides whether or not the filmmaker was successful. In introductory and intermediate film production classes, we bring this maker/viewer relationship right into the classroom. In-class critique of students' work by the instructor and student peers is a process built into the very definition and fabric of a filmmaking workshop class. Everyone in the class can learn an enormous amount from the experiences, successes, mistakes, and feedback of the others. Simply watching one's own film in the presence of an audience reveals things to a filmmaker that could not have been seen in any other way. Also, this process gets students used to others looking at their own work in a critical way; filmmaking is, after all, a very public art form.

That said, an instructor needs to be sensitive to the fact that open, public analysis of one's work is a painful process—not just for beginners but for nearly everyone, including veteran filmmakers. Clearly, some ground rules are essential for both those giving and receiving feedback.

Guidelines

When student films (or concepts or scripts) are presented to the class, it's important to let the class gather their thoughts and jot a few notes down before you launch into the critique session:

1. *Critique must remain constructive.* This does not mean that you only give positive feedback; it's essential that a student know when something is not working—that's what learning is all about. It means that both shortcomings and positive aspects must be pointed out in a very specific way, with support and with suggestions for improvement. Saying "I like it, it's really great!" or "I don't know, it doesn't work, it's a mess" doesn't help the student at all.
2. *Critique must not be personal.* The film should be judged objectively but also with empathy. Students giving feedback should be reminded that they too will be on the hot-seat one day. This ground rule applies not just to negative criticism but to positive criticism as well. I have been in classes where a student is so popular with classmates that the others are inclined to love everything the student does and therefore overlook obvious problems.
3. *Critique does not only mean pointing out problems.* It also means highlighting good work!
4. *Start with those elements that are successful* about the project and then work toward those things that might have been done better.
5. *Work with the intentions of the filmmaker.* It is not helpful for critique to proceed along the lines of how *you* would have made the film. It's not your film that is being critiqued. You need to explore how a student could have better accomplished what he or she was
6. *Be clear about the area of your critique: technical, aesthetic, or conceptual.* For example, a specific shot may not work because it is underexposed (technical).

Or it may not work because it is poorly composed (aesthetic). Or perhaps it's not working because it doesn't communicate what the filmmaker intended (conceptual). It's essential not to muddy up the terms of the critique. It's useful to say, for example, "the idea behind the shot is great and reveals a lot, but it's so overexposed that you pull us out of the dramatic moment and the audience focuses on its technical shortcomings rather than the content of the shot."

7. *Questions are as revealing as observations.* Instead of assuming that an element that doesn't work for you is a mistake, ask the filmmaker what his or her intention was behind a framing, lighting, or editing choice. Sometimes you'll find that the thought process was good, even if the result isn't exactly the strongest.

8. *All students must be active in the critique.* Looking carefully and critically at the work of others is good practice for doing the same to one's own work. Students learn just as much by commenting on the projects of their classmates as they do when they are the center of a critique. It's a responsibility of the instructor to bring everyone into the critique and to elicit constructive feedback from all students.

9. *Expand the critique points on one person's project into lessons for the entire class.* Always remember that the purpose behind open critiques is not just to instruct the person whose film is being scrutinized, but it is for the entire class to learn the same lessons. Do not hesitate to pause a critique session to give a mini-lecture on a specific point for the benefit of everyone in the room.

10. *The filmmaker needs to be open and accepting of critique.* If you have maintained a constructive critique session, the student who is under the microscope should not take feedback personally or get defensive. The idea is to learn by listening. The role of the student whose work is being viewed must be simply to take in everyone's thoughts on their work. It's not always easy, but we all become better filmmakers by knowing firsthand how an audience is receiving our work.

11. *The filmmaker should not respond to critique.* A student who's being critiqued should not respond to the critique unless they are asked a direct question or need clarification about someone's comments. Listening to everyone and everything does not mean that all feedback is helpful and right. It just means that the student filmmakers don't dismiss constructive criticism because they have closed themselves off. It would be a shame for them to miss truly valuable feedback because they were defensive. Later, the filmmaker should process all the feedback, take what was good and helpful, and discard what wasn't applicable. This way they will use the collective perspective of the classroom to improve their films and themselves as filmmakers.

12. *The filmmaker must take notes.* When a student receives criticism, they are often in an emotionally heightened altered state, and this can easily cloud the student's memory in terms of the substance and the spirit of the given verbal comments. Note taking keeps the filmmaker's focus a bit more objective during the critique, and they will also have something tangible and more reliable to refer to in the days after.

Evaluating Creative Projects

The grading of creative work can seem arbitrary to a student, so it is important that students understand how they are being evaluated and by what criteria their films are being judged. Certainly, an instructor should never grade a film the way a movie critic rates movies with a thumbs up or down, or stars, or tomatoes, or anything else equally uninformative. Obviously, these are not helpful to a person who is learning a craft. It's vital that each student understand that most of his or her grade comes from the evaluation of elements that are not subject to whim or opinion (i.e., focus, exposure, on-time delivery, and so on). It's also key to establish that even the more creative dimensions (aesthetic and conceptual approaches) have fairly established principles. Proper use of these principles, such as the rule of thirds for compositions, continuity editing matches, and smooth camera moves, should be written right into their project descriptions when applicable. Any transgression of these tried and true principles should be done thoughtfully, appropriately, and with equal command. It's one thing to plan for and use a jump cut at an appropriate moment, but it's quite another to have jump cuts because you neglected to be watchful for continuity problems during production.

The following are some suggested evaluation criteria. You should add your own to customize the sheet for your own course and projects.

Sample Project Evaluation Sheet

1. Adherence to guidelines for assignment
2. The frame: Technical (focus, exposures, camera moves, etc.)
3. The frame: Aesthetic (composition, movement, lighting, location, etc.)
4. Editing: Technical (proper leader and slate, clean edits, sound levels, continuity principles, etc.)
5. Editing: Aesthetic (rhythm, juxtaposition of shots, narrative shape, POV, etc.)
6. Creativity/originality of approach to subject
7. Style, technique, and tone (appropriateness and consistency)
8. Delivery: On time, labeled, proper format, etc.
9. Evaluation of individual roles (based also on production reports):
 - Director
 - Director of photography
 - Production manager
 - Sound