Is Criticism a Four-Letter Word?

by Steven Frank

1 The movie was E.T. The moment we stepped out of the theater, my older brother asked the dreaded question: “What did you think of the film?”

2 Whatever opinion I held of the “film” was about to be shredded.

3 “I’ll tell you as soon as I go to the bathroom.”

4 He followed me in.

5 Turning away for maximum privacy, I confessed that I had liked the movie. It had moved me.

6 “Well,” my brother said, “I found it maudlin and manipulative. ‘E.T. phone home.’ Honestly, Steve.”

7 I spent the rest of my childhood keeping my opinions of books and movies to myself.

8 Since then, I’ve spent a lot of time wondering whether criticism is a four-letter word. Of course, I can count nine letters there, but is the spirit of the word offensive? I decided to ask my students what they thought, so I wrote criticism on the board, and we played the first-word-that-comes-to-mind game.

9 Judgmental, mean, nasty, and hurtful were the top four responses.

10 “Is all criticism negative?” I asked.

11 The consensus was yes.

12 I tried a different word: review.

13 Opinion, evaluation, advice, and guide, they responded.

14 It may be a question of semantics. People don’t like the word criticize because it’s what they think their parents always do: Your room could double for the city dump.

15 Is it any wonder that parents often hear their anguished teens shouting, “Why do you always criticize me?”

16 Suppose we swapped words—and attitudes. “Mom, I’d like you to review my room, please.”
“Review it?”

“Yes. Evaluate it. Constructively. Sensibly.”

Then a conversation might take place. “Well, honey, I’ve noticed some specific hazards there. The DVDs on the floor, for instance, are slippery, and if you step on one in the middle of the night, you might fall. Further, that turkey sandwich you forgot to throw away is starting to grow mold. And if you wanted to invite a friend over, it might help if you cleared a space on your chair for him to sit down.”

Notice that in this scenario, the parent is supporting her opinion with concrete evidence. The criticism feels less, well, critical, because it makes sense. And that’s what a good piece of criticism ought to do.

Suppose you’re asked to write a critical evaluation of a book. Don’t just trash it. You should take an honest look at what works about it and what doesn’t. Start with an opinion, but be sure to back up that opinion by answering a few key questions: Are the characters credible? Do they think, feel, and act like human beings (even if they’re aliens)? The poet Marianne Moore once described what readers want in literature as “imaginary gardens with real toads.” The setting of a book can be as outrageous as a strange world down a rabbit hole, but the characters that live there must seem believable.

They should also be well rounded. Look for characters that seem real, not stereotypical. Good heroes have flaws; good villains have fans. Take Satan, for example, in John Milton’s Paradise Lost. He’s so charming, he’s hard to hate.

Also ask whether the main character evolves. Harry Potter gains confidence. Hamlet finds his voice (a little late). Alice learns how to read strangers in Wonderland. In a good book, the protagonist grows.

A book’s plot should be believable too. Do the turning points lead the reader to the next in a credible, even inevitable, chain of events? A plot with too many coincidences is contrived. Most action movies have contrived plots—the hero walks through a swarm of bullets and is never hit, then turns and fires a single shot to defeat his enemy. (Stories like that can be great fun; they’re just not great literature.)

A well-crafted plot surprises you with believable twists. I’m still thrilled every time I find out that Charlie inherits the chocolate factory, because everything leading up to that outcome has been quietly pointing the way.

The best critics don’t just spew their opinions; they help you form and deepen yours by examining an experience so carefully as to see it inside out.

In school, you’re probably most often assigned book reviews or movie reviews, but don’t let your critical eye glaze over on those familiar genres.
Try writing a restaurant review (it’s a great excuse to go out to dinner). Review a video game, a blog, or a new album. Review a building that just went up downtown or a date you went on. And if your parents are being hypercritical, ask them if they wouldn’t mind a little constructive evaluation in the form of a parent review.

How to Offer Constructive Criticism

Whether in our personal or professional lives, we sometimes find the need to address problems or conflicts with friends, family members, or colleagues. Here are some suggestions to keep in mind when delivering constructive criticism.

- Focus on facts, not feelings. Just state the problem and keep emotion out of it.
- Be specific. Explain what your criticism relates to, in detail.
- Be timely. Discuss a situation as soon as your emotions cool.
- Be direct but tactful. Make sure that you use the words that you actually mean, instead of searching for a softer word that doesn’t really make your point.
- Give feedback in private. You don’t need to embarrass someone in front of an audience. Take the person aside and speak with him or her one-on-one.
- Know what you want to say. You may even want to write down key points so that you don’t forget anything or get sidetracked.
- Listen to what the other person has to say. After you speak your mind, listen to the other side of the story. You may not be aware of some circumstances. Keep an open mind, listen, and be sure to communicate regularly.

It’s taken me 30 years to learn something critical about criticism. Criticism isn’t just an attack; it’s a defense. If I had been trained to think critically, I could have defended my opinion of *E.T.* I could have countered my brother’s dismissive “maudlin and manipulative” by saying, “Well, I think the movie is convincing. What lonely boy doesn’t need a friend, especially a friend with magic powers to heal wounds and make bicycles fly? And if you got lost a few billion miles from your family, wouldn’t you want to phone home too?”
29 Why write criticism? Because if you write your opinions—and support them with good, logical thinking—you’ll be something that I wish I’d been as a teen.

30 Confident.

31 And that’s another nine-letter word.

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45 What is the primary purpose of the selection?

A To encourage readers to write reviews rather than criticism
B To offer readers a new perspective on criticism
C To document the harm suffered by the author because of criticism
D To suggest that good parenting requires criticism

46 The author mentions the movie *E.T.* in order to —

F support his opinion that good movies provoke good debates
G explain his inability to view movies with a critical eye
H provide context for his early experience handling criticism
J indicate that the events in his article took place long ago
47 Read the following sentence from paragraph 14.

Your room could double for the city dump.

The author’s purpose in including this statement is to —

A provide an example of unconstructive criticism
B indicate how harsh parents can be
C show that his mother was as critical as his brother
D demonstrate the importance of clear, direct statements

48 What does the boxed information on constructive criticism have in common with the reading selection?

F It emphasizes the importance of defending yourself when you have been criticized.
G It reminds readers that different kinds of people respond differently to criticism.
H It offers specific pieces of advice for the reader to use.
J It employs the viewpoint of a sympathetic first-person narrator.
49  The author refers to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* in order to —

A  clarify the difference between reviewing and criticizing  
B  call attention to his favorite book  
C  offer a suggestion on how the book could have been improved  
D  provide an example of a good plot

50  Why does the author directly address the reader in paragraphs 21 through 27?

F  He is offering praise for well-written books.  
G  He is scolding the reader for thinking too critically.  
H  He wants to engage and instruct the reader.  
J  He has changed his opinion about the purpose of criticism.
DIRECTIONS

Answer the following question in the box labeled “Short Answer #2” on page 5 of your answer document.

In “Is Criticism a Four-Letter Word?,” how does the author feel about criticism? Support your answer with evidence from the selection.