

## How to critique presentations of others

Every presentation you listen to is an opportunity for a critique. Even if you keep your opinions to yourself, that's a significant person. You can learn a lot from your critiques of others' work. You learn to see a piece of work from the standpoint of how it could be improved, what weaknesses ought to be addressed, and if this becomes a habit, then you can apply this approach to your own work. If you share your opinions of others, then even more people can profit from your efforts.

Despite the unquestioned benefits of listening critically to presentations, your first tendency may be to minimize the possibility that you might contribute anything. You might think "What do I know?", "I am insufficient!" This is the wrong approach. Rather, look outwards "How can I be helpful?" Actually, your level of ignorance (if indeed it is any greater than the presenter's) is a great advantage. You come to the work uncontaminated by prior knowledge, able more accurately to respond to what the presenter's words actually say, without the sometimes confounding influence of familiarity that may make gibberish seem intelligible to the presenter. The help offered should be aimed at facilitating the presenter's journey to the best presentation proposal within his/her capabilities.

### Approach to a critique

1. Review the goals: Before coming to the Symposium, read the guidelines given to the presenters.
2. Take notes: Take *lots* of notes. Write notes to yourself to remind yourself your thoughts as you listen.
3. Listen actively: Help the presentation along by asking yourself questions, e.g. What is the main question addressed by this presentation? How compelling is that question? (Why should I care?) Is there a process of discovery that is presented? Does the process seem aimed at addressing the main question? Do I understand what's going on?
4. Listen critically: "Critically", of course, does not mean "nasty". Rather, it means putting the presentation under a magnifying glass and politely but firmly requiring a justification for any statement of purported fact. After every phrase ask yourself "How do you know that?", and if you can find no answer WRITE THAT DOWN.
5. Listen for a story: Do you find a central question? Does dramatic tension rise to the point when the question is set forth? Can you think of elements of the story that would have made it stronger? If you ever find yourself asking "Why am I hearing this? Where is this going? What is the point?", WRITE THAT DOWN.
6. Look for technical problems: While the content is more important, it is impossible to disentangle what is said from how it is said. If you find problems with how a slide looks or the manner in which the story is told, WRITE THAT DOWN.
7. Prepare questions to ask: As you listen to the presentation write down specific questions you might ask when the presentation concludes. Always have at least one on hand ready to go. This is your chance to have direct interaction with the presenter, to broaden your ability to write a useful critique, and to test whether matters that weren't clear were so because of problems with the presentation or an intrinsic lack of focus. Do NOT have any self consciousness about asking a question. If you didn't understand something, it's not your fault! Communication requires two active parties.

### **Writing the critique**

1. Be specific: Saying things like, "Not clear!" generally doesn't help. Presumably the presenter thought it was clear. Pinpoint the problem. It's often a good idea to suggest a specific alternative, even if you have to make up facts to do so.
2. Be constructive: Accept the goals of the presenter, so long as they're within the overall goals of the assignment, and find ways to help the presenter achieve those goals.
3. BE KIND: Even the rankest tripe, if executed sincerely, is a stepping stone to something better. Never write anything that is not rooted in love. But recognize that it is just as unkind to say, "Looks great!" when it does not look great as it is to find fault where there is none.
4. Summarize: After going through all of your thoughts and suggestions, write a brief summary, starting out with your main impression of the presentation and its progress in meeting its goals. Comment on major strengths as well as weaknesses. Although it is generally easier to write the summary after you've finished, you might choose to position it at the beginning of your critique.

### **Delivering the critique**

The critique doesn't do the person any good unless s/he has an opportunity to act on it. E-mail it to the presenter as soon as possible, allowing the person time to consider what you had to say and possibly to make changes in the presentation. E-mail the presenter your critique, copying me.