

How to critique the work of others

When you are given the work of others to review, perhaps research proposals, your first tendency may be to think of yourself, especially if the work lies outside of your area of expertise. "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 is a great advantage. You come to the work uncontaminated by prior knowledge, able more accurately to respond to what the author's words say (rather than what you know they mean). The help offered should be aimed at facilitating the author's journey to the best proposal within his/her capabilities.

Steps in reviewing

1. Review the goals: Read the guidelines given to the author.
2. Skim the work: Once through quickly just to catch the drift of where the author's going.
3. Read the work: A bit slower this time, comparing what it says with the given aims of the proposal. You might want to underline important points, but no heavy editing or anything that will slow you down.
4. Read the proposal critically for content: "Critically", of course, does not mean "nasty". Rather, it means putting the proposal under a magnifying glass and politely but firmly requiring a justification for any statement of purported fact. Pause after every phrase and ask "How do you know that?", and if you can find no answer WRITE THAT DOWN.
5. Read the proposal critically for story: Do you find a central question? Do you see how what you're reading relates to that central question? Pause after every phrase and ask "Why am I reading this? Where is this going? What is the point?", and if you can find no answer WRITE THAT DOWN.
6. Read the proposal critically for style:
 - a. Organization: Does each paragraph have an obvious purpose? Do you sense a story begin told? Is each paragraph coherent, with no wasted words?
 - b. Expression: Do sentences sound right? If not, can you point out the problem?
 - c. Grammar/spelling: Do the person a favor and catch the glitches.
7. Should you read a cited article? It often helps to do so, particularly when a description of it is too confused to understand. But it is undoubtedly extra work. You need to decide.
8. Summarize: Write a brief summary, starting out with your main impression of the proposal and its progress in meeting its goals. Comment on major strengths as well as weaknesses. Leave the small stuff for the end.

In general

1. Be specific: Saying things like, "Not clear!" generally doesn't help. Presumably the author thought it was clear. Pinpoint the problem. It's often a good idea to suggest a specific alternative.
2. Be constructive: Accept the goals of the author, so long as their within the overall goals of the assignment, and find ways to help the author achieve those goals.
3. BE KIND: Even the rankest tripe, if sincerely written, 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.