

User Research Plan: Critique Platform

Problem

Many artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, etc. don't have access to peers or an artistic community they trust to provide honest, nuanced critique on their works-in-progress.

Background

It is my aim to design a digital solution for artists looking for trustworthy critique. An ideal solution will allow users to receive detailed, useful feedback from several qualified critics on works of varying media without risk of exposing the user to unhelpful, low-quality, or mean-spirited critique.

Research Goal

What I want to learn from user research is the viability/usefulness of such a digital solution, and how to best design a system that meets the critique needs of all kinds of artists.

Research Objectives

1. To understand what digital solutions exist to the problem, and where they succeed/fall short
2. To empathize with various artists' positive and negative experiences of peer critique
3. To learn what kind of critique works best for various artists
4. To understand the concerns over and limitations of digital critique, and how best to navigate them

Methodologies

- Competitive analysis to understand the market
- Interviews to empathize with artist users ahead of solution design
- Usability tests and interviews at several points in the design process to ensure user concerns are addressed, and to gauge the success of the design

User Research Questions

1. Have you been part of an *in-person* group crit/critique before? If so, tell me about that experience.
2. Have you ever given or solicited critique from someone *online* before? If so, tell me about that experience.
3. In your words, what are the *goals* of peer critique?
4. In your words, what are the *rules* of peer critique?
5. What *kind of critique* do you like getting on your work?
6. Is critique on your work an *important* part of your artistic process?
7. Try to walk me through your emotions when you are expecting and *receiving critique* from someone.
8. When you are *giving critique* to someone, do you have a feedback strategy or style?
9. Is there a point in the timeline of your artistic process where you feel critique is most helpful?
10. What are your concerns about giving and receiving *online* critique of your work?

Ideal Interview Participant Pool

- Artists of various disciplines
- Artists of various levels of experience
- Artists of varying previous experiences with peer critique
- Artists of various levels of fluency with digital products

Assumptions/Risk

I assume artists I talk to will have enough foresight to predict what problems they might have with digital critique if they haven't dealt with it before.

I risk assigning too much importance to every idea from interviews and designing a product that's too complicated for new users to understand.

I risk talking to only artists who have positive feelings about critique and miss the perspective of those who avoid it for a variety of reasons.

Timeline

Phase 1: Research

Phase 2: Lo-fi Design Testing

Phase 3: Hi-fi Design Testing

Key User Interview Findings

Surprises & Themes:

- Online crit vs. In-person crit isn't as important of a dichotomy to draw more than *Asynchronous vs. Synchronous crit* is. Zoom calls were a very similar experience to in-class critiques for artists, but having time to sit with a piece individually, experience it multiple times, gestate thought, and write a response created a different experience for both critic and artist. Most artists across several art disciplines greatly preferred asynchronous critique to synchronous.
- All interviews stressed the importance of the critiqued artist *sharing prompts* for discussion and things to look at within the piece in order for critique to be the most focused and better help the artist. One interview indicated this is a good way to keep critiques from becoming disparaging and personal. This was all a surprise for me because many group crits I've been a part of have restrained the artist from pre-empting or talking during the crit.
- Artists I talked to had a range of attitudes towards giving critique, namely in how *'brutally honest'* they wish to be. One interviewee noted that they refrain from critiquing broader issues she believe might come down to 'taste' or cultural differences. One interviewee expressed they are mostly worried about being perceived as too mean. Conversely, another interviewee said he's often frustrated with critique because people are 'too nice', and hates the idea of a 'compliment sandwich' for instance.
- Most artists agreed that receiving feedback is most helpful after a 'first draft' of the piece because they are most interested in *broader critiques* of the piece's direction and promise than of smaller incidental details. One artist noted that feedback is most helpful after self-editing a first draft one or two times in order to avoid critique that's too focused on narrow details, and to get fresh eyes on the project at a point when she's become too desensitized to the project. One artist noted that they need a higher level of trust of someone to suggest more minor, technical edits (aka 'craft' critique).
- Not all artists who have had experience with critique have been a part of a group critique, and interviews indicated important differences between the two. Critiques can become influenced by one another in both synchronous and asynchronous settings (for instance, comments on a Reddit post). Artists generally prefer to be critiqued *one-on-one*, though one interview indicated that a benefit of critiquing as part of a group is that critics learn from one another and can more easily improve their critique skills over time.
- Every interview indicated that a very detrimental aspect of group critique are participants who *aren't invested* in the process and don't care to give valuable feedback. This was mostly a problem in art classes, though also in an asynchronous setting where users traded critique and left low-quality written feedback or used AI to quickly write impersonal responses in order to qualify for having their work critiqued.
- Most artists agreed that a bad critique is one delivered *without explanation*. One interviewee who is a professional book editor explained that a good critique consists of (1) identifying the problem, (2) explaining the problem, and (3) suggesting solutions.

- One writer interviewed mentioned how the ability to make specific, inline comments can be helpful if it pertains to the crit prompt. Having to reference a word, or sentence in another section makes critique more difficult if it's relevant.
- All interviewees agreed that a **lack of trust** of a critic comes from not knowing their level of expertise (or suspecting their lack of experience) and doubting how invested they are in giving quality feedback. One interviewee added that feeling as though the critic is 'holding back' harsher comments also creates distrust.
- Artists indicated **several benefits** to critique besides improving their work. One interviewee liked the aspect of a 'captive audience' to gauge reactions, and also appreciated that it encouraged him to view his work with a more critical, detail-oriented perspective. Another artist liked the sense of community a group critique fostered among her peers in the arts. Another artist mentioned that critiquing other artists' work was inspiring and helped her deepen her craft.
- One artist shared that receiving recorded **audio critique** asynchronous can feel belittling if she didn't ask for it, since verbal critique can feel like asserting authority or 'talking down to' the artist.
- One artist shared they have a negative connotation of critiques, that they feel **creatively stifling** when he'd prefer critique to help expand his vision and give him ideas.
- All artists expressed that they are **nervous** leading up to a critique, especially if they don't know the critic, but all interviewees shared that they were more calm and focused during the critique.

Design Implications:

- The biggest takeaway from artist interviews is that every user will prefer different kinds of critique, and this will necessitate design that is versatile and accommodates a range of attitudes, goals, and experience levels to promote general trust between users.
 - Ideally, artists will give and receive critique to others with similar values. For example, an artist that desires brutally honest feedback should not interact often with artists who are scared of being perceived as mean.
 - Or, some artists may explicitly prefer giving and receiving feedback in audio form rather than written word in order to communicate nuances of meaning.
 - Publicly visible information should include artist levels of experience in their disciplines, which interviewees said is important in building trust with strangers.
- Each piece an artist works on requires different foci for critique depending on their progress and vision for the piece. A successful design will allow artists to express where critics should direct their attention in order for the artist to feel satisfied.
- An early design decision that must be made is the synchronicity of critique for this digital solution. I am definitively choosing to create a solution for *asynchronous* critique because artist interviews indicated this to be a more promising and rich form of critique, and one which is more convenient for most users. There will also be less barrier to entry to artists who are nervous to talk one-on-one with strangers.
- A mutual rating system will possibly be critical in order to keep accountability for low-quality critiques. Perhaps it is better to reward or publicly distinguish particularly high-quality and helpful critics rather

than punish low-quality ones, so as to promote an aspirational culture of critique. A rating system will improve the experience of low-quality critique recipients, who said in interviews they were often displeased when bad or unfocused critiques are met with no consequences.

- There are both advantages and disadvantages to letting critics see other critiques of a piece they're tasked with. Further testing must be done to indicate whether one approach is better than the other, or whether it should be left to the artist to decide what is visible to a critic.
 - If critiques are eventually made completely private, there should ideally be some resource that less experienced critics can consult to learn what makes a good critique, and/or allow critiqued artists to write back to the critic with an opinion of their critique.
 - If critiques are eventually made public, there should be no publicly visible rating system so as not to encourage 'funny' comments or critique meant to entertain others rather than help the artist.
- A good design will minimize the amount of anxiety artists are under when awaiting critique on their work. Perhaps the best way to mitigate this anxiety is by *scarce* communication of the status of an in-process critique.

Summary:

My research interviews were *incredibly* helpful in carving out an ideal solution that accommodates all artists and critics. I've been shown that critique is a very delicate, emotional, and personal thing that requires a special empathy in design to do right. Moreover, I've been shown that a successful solution is quite achievable and would make a positive impact on artists of all disciplines and experience. My low-fidelity wireframes should be sure to test my most sensitive hypotheses, like that a rating system will promote high-effort critiques, that artists wish to give and receive feedback to artists of similar values and experience, and that asynchronous critique is an ideal medium. I will also use my wireframes to test whether critiques from other users should be made public or private in progressive iterations of the project.