UNIT 7: DESIGN CRITIQUE
Design Critique Guidelines

The design critique, often referred to as the "crit," is a vital component of the design process. The critique Crit is an opportunity to refine your ability to speak about your work as well as provide actionable feedback to others—skills you will use daily as a professional web designer or developer.

GROUND RULES

1. **First and foremost, the critique is built upon a community of trust.** Remember: the discussion is about the work, never about the designer. By maintaining a courteous and professional environment, your work is able to be continuously refined.

2. **Second, everyone participates.** This is a matter of building trust and establishing a sense of fairness. Your peers will put forth a good faith effort when dissecting your work and you should respond in-kind.

HOW TO RECEIVE CRITICISM

1. **Briefly set the context.** Recall that design is the communication of an idea—what are you attempting to communicate? The setup should be just long enough to ensure that your audience has enough background information to accurately assess your proposed design solution.

2. **Invite specific feedback rather than pointing out your perceived errors.** For example, let's assume you're having difficulty creating hierarchy within your text. Stating "I would like to hear if your feel there's enough contrast between the subheads and body copy" is preferable to "I really don't like the typeface I'm using for the body copy." The first statement provides a framework for your audience to work within and helps to ensure that you receive the feedback you're looking for. The second comment is just a vague statement. What is the outcome you would expect from your audience? Do you want them to help you like the chosen typeface?

3. **Listen openly, not defensively.** Remember, the comments regarding your work are not about you as an individual. Your design solution is not a direct reflection of you as a person—don't take the criticism of that solution as a personal attack.

4. **Know that not every piece of feedback requires a response.** The crit is a more like a conversation in which you are an active listener rather than a Q&A session in which you're being interrogated. That said, dig deep when needed. If an interesting point is raised, feel free to explore the point further.

5. **Take notes.** Mark up your work: circle what's working, cross out dead-end ideas—create your own system of note taking that works for you and stick to it. Don't try and rely upon your memory after the fact.

6. **Respond strategically.** Not all feedback is actionable feedback, i.e. learn to separate the signal from noise. In some instances you may more knowledge of the design problem at hand; nonetheless, don't be afraid to admit you're wrong, consider new ideas, or kill your darlings.

HOW TO GIVE CRITICISM

1. **Understand the problem at hand so that your feedback is as helpful to the discussion as possible.** If you are unclear about the objective, ask for clarity. Having a clear understanding of the challenge facing the designer will help you to frame your thinking. What would you have considered were you the tackling the problem at hand? Try to ask questions that begin with "have you considered…" or "what would happen if…" to engage the designer.

2. **Provide objective—not subjective—feedback.** Objective feedback examines the work at face value whereas subjective feedback can be clouded by personal preferences. Our earlier example dealt with the challenge of creating hierarchy in body copy.

   Objective feedback sounds like "the size and weight of the subhead type is too similar to the body—that may be big reason why you're not seeing enough contrast."

   Subjective feedback, on the other hand, is similar to "I don't like using sans serif faces for my body copy." Key point: the designer can frequently take action in response to objective feedback.

UNIT 7: DESIGN CRITIQUE
Design Critique Guidelines

3. **Positive feedback isn't positive if it's merely a pat on the back.** There isn't anything wrong with paying a compliment, nor should the critique be devoid of positivity. Nonetheless, if the designer leaves the crit with nothing but a lot of happy thoughts he or she is let with nothing to work with. There is no perfect design solution, and at the very least, there are almost always alternative design solutions to consider.

4. **Provide actionable ideas.** Again, these are objective considerations and not subjective observations, i.e., "have you considered…" rather than "I like…" Your goal is to help refine ideas that appear to be working and to identify directions that aren't. The actionable ideas you provide should be as specific as possible. Less specific example: "Would the user see greater hierarchy if the type was bigger?" More specific example: "Based upon the size of your body copy, consider increasing the subheads by 50% to increase contrast."

FURTHER INSIGHT

A useful method to developing your ability to critique work—and to further grow as a designer/coder—is to read the work of respected critics. In design and technology circles, Jessica Helfand, Steven Heller, and Rick Poyner are well known for both their academic and professional approaches to design criticism. Their writings can be found online and off, in short- and long-form, and as academic or casual prose. Their writings are also frequently found on Design Observer, a well-known site that examines the global impact of design across industries.