

The Art of Providing a Compassionate Copywriting Critique

By Stefan Andrews

In a recent mastermind group meeting, one member mentioned an article she was preparing. At my suggestion, she sent her first draft to us for feedback. I reviewed it and noted seven areas I thought could be improved.

Then I sent it to her with apprehension, wondering if I'd been too harsh, too insensitive, or too straight. That led me to wondering what it takes to write a sensitive critique.

Have you, like me, thought, "Are there guidelines to being a compassionate copywriting critic?"

As a teacher, I was taught to focus on a child's positive behavior to encourage more such behavior from all students. And it worked. One "critiquer" (my new word) said when she focuses on the positives—the things that are working—the rest that isn't just "disappears."

When you critique, look for "what's right" with the writing and not "what's wrong." Constructive praise works far better to help the writer improve than "the editorial board model" of focusing on what's not "good writing."

So, how is it done?

You critique to strengthen the person's writing voice by providing helpful response. You focus on the "what." As you read, ask yourself, "What shines?"

Tell the writer, "Here's what's already good. Here's what I loved." And, know enough about your craft to tell them why. The writer is now thinking, "How can I do more of that?" After all, as a writer, you want to know what's working, what needs changing, and what needs tossing, entirely. And, most writers also said they want to know "why," as well.

Critiquers should be recognizing and encouraging what's great. But, praise for the sake of "being nice" is not constructive and is worthless to the copywriter wanting to improve her writing. So, you need to point out what's not working from the framework of what's working.

For instance, copywriters focus on one idea—"the power of one," as Mark Ford and AWAI have taught us. You may need to help the writer see when to refocus any section not congruent with that concept. You may ask, "This looks like an entirely new idea not in harmony with your original one. What do you think?"

Or ... the piece you're critiquing has an excellent paragraph of benefits, but they're in a series of sentences. And, they're difficult to read and comprehend.

You might say, "I really like the benefits you have shared here. They resonate with me and make me want to learn more about the product. But, I had to work too hard to understand them. You might consider listing them in a bullet format and tying them to product features. That would be a lot easier to read and understand."

Before you critique, consider the feelings of your writer. She needs to trust you, feel safe, and be open to improving her copy.

Beginning writers need encouragement and specific guidelines. I suggest you find three positive copy techniques for every one suggestion for improvement.

One writer commented, "When I was first writing blog posts from my travels, I got a tremendous amount of positive feedback from my hundreds of readers. This empowered me to believe I could write."

And, this is important. Having the confidence that she can write prepares the writer to receive a critique, knowing it could make her writing stronger.

For experienced copywriters, compliment effective writing, share a suggested improvement, and then make another positive comment. Repeat this ratio of two positives to one negative as needed. This helps the writer see where she can improve the copy and confirms what she feels is working.

When writing resonates with you, identify the phrases that keep you reading and encourage the copywriter to do more of them. All it takes is a simple comment that you "liked" a certain section focused on the benefits for getting the product. Next, comment that another part "turned you away," because it only praised features of the product. Then highlight the section that called for taking action based on the benefits. This gives the writer specific information to improve her copywriting.

Most of us are in groups where we rely on others for that feedback to improve our copywriting. So, we need to submit our work to our group for feedback. There needs to be trust that they "have our back" and will give us a deep and honest critique.

One writer shared her feelings about being a member of a critique group: "I find that their advice is usually 'spot on,' even if I disagree in the moment. I sleep on the comments and then tinker with my piece by incorporating the suggestions I feel comfortable with. I notice the comments that help me see what I couldn't see and think what I hadn't thought before are the most useful. Usually these are given in the context of improving my work and empowering me as a writer. I typically end up with a stronger piece after all is said and rewritten."

And, isn't that the point of a constructive, compassionate critique?

What do you do to provide your group members or copy partner with a constructive, compassionate critique? Share your ideas in the comments below.

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