

# Critique and Reflect

*The article explores the concept of critique and reflection as a vital studio structure for discussing and analyzing student artwork, aiming to enhance artistic decision-making and personal expression. It outlines a four-step process for facilitating effective critique sessions, emphasizing the importance of clear goals, varied formats, allocated time, and archiving for further evaluation and growth*

## The Studio Structure of Critique & Reflect

In *Studio Thinking 3* (2022), authors refer to the third studio structure as critique; in the adapted edition for elementary and middle school arts education, this structure is called "talking about art." Critique essentially refers to the questions that lead to purposeful exploration of the meaning generated by an artifact. Critique weaves with demonstration lecture and students-at-work during class time. These three structures alternate naturally as authentic arts learning unfolds.

In this section, critique and reflect, as a studio structure, refers to conversations about students' work, whether completed or in process. It is the structure predominantly focused on reflection and discussion during class time. It is an intentional pause from other artistic processes to observe, consult, and reflect on the work students are creating or the process they are experiencing.

The purpose of critique while making a work of art is to inform artistic or technical choices, elevate student thinking and activate personal voice. During critique, students and teachers engage in dialogue to gain awareness of whether the design choices made in the creative process have helped or hindered their goals for the piece.

Learning to recognize the most effective questions, interrogating with clarity, and eliciting responses through questioning will assure that critique reaches appropriate depth and specificity to guide students' decision making.

Asking questions about works in progress can be a powerful catalyst to learning. However, haphazard and thoughtless questions can shut down creativity and diminish student engagement. Determining target outcomes and tracking how students (and the teacher) navigate toward those outcomes is pivotal in forging a supportive classroom culture.

Authors of *Studio Thinking 3* use the following bullet points to describe critique:

- Central structure for discussion and reflection.
- A pause to focus on observation, conversation, and reflection.
- Focus on student work.
- Works are completed or in progress.
- Display is temporary and informal.

# Four Steps for Facilitating Critique in the Classroom

## Step 1: Determine the Purpose

"What do I as the teacher want to accomplish through this artistic conversation? What are my goals for discrete sessions? Are my goals different for different sessions? What will I measure to determine the success of the session?"

The questions created for critique and reflection direct student thinking. It's important to have a clear purpose about which of these outcomes you desire:

- Develop artistry
- Critique works of art
- Support students' metacognition
- Explore visual art core standards
- Explore core standards from other curricular subjects
- Work on 21st century skills
- Build relationships with students
- Build classroom community

Once teachers prioritize their desired learning outcomes, the value of the conversation can be targeted strategically and questions can be thoughtfully prepared.

## Step 2: Determine the Format

"What will be the most effective way to engage students in artistic conversations about their work, the work of others, or the social, historical, or cultural context of the work? How will I assess the success of the session?"

Critique and reflection can be conducted as verbal discussion in pairs, small groups, or as a class; or, these can be recorded in written or visual reflections as a journal entry, letter to an artist, or mind map. These processes can significantly strengthen one's own work (self-assessment), contribute to the work of peers, or develop understanding of canonical works.

Specific applications follow:

1. Students can engage in self-assessment conversation by: writing their perceptions, thoughts, questions, and value statements in a journal; recording their insights onto a digital device; sketching a series of images, etc.
2. Students can present their works-in-progress to peers in pairs or small groups, sharing their thinking and emotional connections to their work and describing what they intend to do next. They receive no feedback from peers or teachers; success is measured by students' fluency in capturing what they have accomplished and how they intend to improve or complete their work.
3. Students can discuss a peer work or a canonical work in small groups while capturing responses in writing, in sketches, or in an audio recording. The response record becomes the measure of success and the material for analysis.
4. Another powerful variant of peer assessment is to have the student/creators ask questions of their peers in pairs or small groups.
5. Mentor assessment can model highly attentive description, analysis, interpretation, judgment, and theorizing. But doing this requires extremely careful set up and closure. The most powerful application of mentor assessment is one-on-one in teacher/student conferences, driven by neutral questions, not evaluative statements from the teacher/mentor. The success of mentor assessment is evidenced in the student's response to the mentoring session.

## Step 3: Allocate Time

"When should these kinds of conversations take place? How much time do I need to have a thorough conversation?"

The time allocated to talking about art will vary according to its purpose(s). It could be 10 minutes or less. It could occupy different periods of time during the learning session (i.e., early in the session, in the middle, at the end). It could extend over a much longer period of time. The key is that it is crucial to include artistic conversations—purposefully and routinely—in order to realize and benefit from the four studio structures.

A caveat: be wary of approaching these artistic conversations through a would-be egalitarianism. It isn't necessary to have every student present work or even respond to work during a critique session. This tendency can slow down the pace of critique and weaken its efficacy.

## Step 4: Archive and Evaluate Artistic Conversations

"What do I do with material from saved artistic conversations? What sorts of analyses could generate cascading insights: by me as teacher/mentor, by students, and by parents and community members?"

Because students' comments and/or sketches bring significant insight, it is important to record students' responses (i.e., who responds, and what they have to say). This could be done via audio recording, peer note-taking, self-reflective journaling, etc.

The data (sketches, recordings, etc.) provided by artistic conversation sessions could be used on posters, memos, letters/emails/texts sent home or to professional artists/companies/organizations. Student comments could be used as sidebars in programs, as commentary in hallway galleries, on school websites, etc.

A portfolio can be a useful way for students to archive their own work. Sections of the portfolio might include artistic conversations, works in progress, finished works, ideas for exploration, and drafts of artists' statements that evoke their creative arcs, etc. The portfolios could be featured—as videos or on desktops—at back-to-school nights, with the students serving as docents of their portfolios. You could affix comments/sketches/photos etc. to one of the walls in your room—a sort of graffiti wall—featuring the artistic conversations alongside student work.



# CRITIQUE FOR CREATORS

## Critical Response Process (CRP)

A four-step process for artists to receive feedback on their work in progress called [The Critical Response Process](#), developed in the 1990's by Liz Lerman (dancer and choreographer), helps groups critique artistic works still being developed. This four-part method emphasizes dialogue and inquiry and gives artists the opportunity to have some control of the feedback directed at their work.

### Statements of Meaning

Responders offer positive statements to describe what was meaningful to them about the work they witnessed. "What was stimulating, surprising, evocative, memorable, touching, unique, compelling, meaningful for you?"

### Artist as Questioner

The artist has an opportunity to ask the responders questions. Both broad or specific questions aid dialogue in different ways; the more the creator can hone their focus, the deeper the dialogue.

### Neutral Questions from Responders

Responders ask the creator factual or informational questions to help the artist see their work from a fresh perspective. Learning to embed opinions in the framework of a neutral question can help the artist achieve a new perspective without feeling they need to defend themselves.

## Permissioned Opinions

Responders ask permission to give an opinion. First, they state the opinion topic, and then the creator can decide whether they would like to hear the opinion.

## Questions for Creators

The questioning might be the most important part of the creative process for the maker (e.g., pre-K-12 student, college art major, arts entrepreneur, professional artist, etc.). Below are a few questions creators might ask themselves (and their mentors) before, during, and after participating in the creative process.

Some questions naturally emerge for the creator as they move their idea to creative action. Examples may include:

- What medium/form/scale do I intend to work within?
- Are there touchstones or antecedents I want to mine as I create my work? What materials, research, or principles should I consider before I work? How transparent should I make these?
- How long do I anticipate this work will take? How will I know when I am finished?
- What emotional impact do I want my work to have? How will I know if I have achieved it?
- How will I share my work to its best advantage? (e.g., real time/real space, digitally, etc.)

During the creative process, the creator may ask questions grounded in the elements of the chosen art form. Below are some questions adaptable to all art forms, along with a few questions specific to particular art forms. Integrating art form elements into questions may promote greater clarity and specificity.

- Are my choices fitting my intent? In creating my dance, are my choices of body usage, energy, space, time, and motion fitting my intent?
- Are my choices consistent, or is inconsistency apparent? Are my drama characters consistent? If not, is the inconsistency justified?
- Are there ways I can make my work clearer, more powerful, more communicative? How could I improve pitch, duration, timbre, form, and/or expressive qualities to make my work clearer, more powerful, or more communicative?
- Am I conveying an accessible emotional tone that consumers can understand? Am I applying techniques of line, shape, color, value, texture, space, and form that effectively communicate the desired emotional impact?
- Is my work Interesting?
- Is there a clear beginning, middle, and end? Does my dramatic piece have a clear beginning, middle, end? Are exposition, rising action, climax, and denouement easy to identify and interpret? Does conflict occur at the appropriate point in the story?

Critique and reflection sessions after completing a work of art have a different flavor. The questions associated with this phase are personal: some are introspective, and some are intended to be shared.

- What moment, section, piece, measure, etc., do I consider my best work? Why?
- If I had more time, what would warrant additional attention?
- Who could I seek out as a mentor to help me realize my vision?
- Where would I like to go next with my work?

## Question for Creators

[Click here to view the article "Question for Creators"](#) for a cheat sheet you can print and keep on your desk or in your hand when coaching students in the creative process.

## Questions for Consumers

[Click here to view the article "Questions for Consumers"](#) for a printable with questions you might ask while students read a work of art in the classroom.

## Utilizing a Gallery Wall

[Click here to read "Critique in the Classroom: How to Use a Gallery Wall"](#) and learn how Visual Arts Educator Rachel Henderson uses questioning strategies in conjunction with a student art display.

## Additional Frameworks for Critically Thinking About Art

You might also want to check out these frameworks for critiquing finished works of art, whether professionally or student-made.

- Visible Thinking Routines
- Visual Thinking Strategies
- Perceive and Reflect

[Click here to read Chapter \\_\\_ "Reading Works of Art"](#) for more about these strategies.

## Read about the other three Studio Structures for Learning:

- [Demonstration-Lecture](#)
- [Students-at-Work](#)
- [Performance and Exhibition](#)



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