

Ideas for Critiquing Your Poem (And Other People's Poem's, Too)

Two Rules:

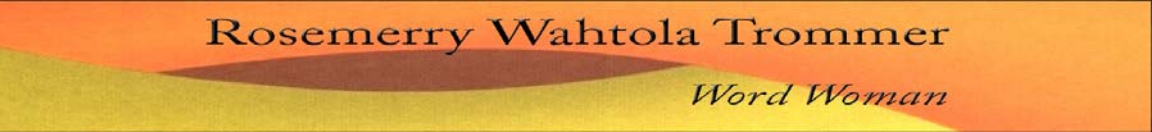
- 1) Be Gentle and Positive
- 2) Be Unsentimental and Constructive

Things to Consider:

- 1) Are you trusting your reader? Believe in your reader's intelligence.
- 2) Is it novel? Is there a sense of discovery? No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.
- 3) Did you say something worth saying? What is the point? Are you focused?

Guidelines:

- 1) Show, don't tell.
- 2) Stick to one point of view.
- 3) Stick with one tense—usually. And know that present tense has an immediacy that grabs the reader in a way past just can't do.
- 4) Omit needless words.
- 5) Consider the line. Does each line stand on its own? Is the last word strong? Make a true choice with each line—where does it begin and end.
- 6) Use active verbs. Try to replace these verbs: am, is, are, was, were, to be, had been, could, would, should, might have, will be. Try strong vivid verbs such as crawl, scamper, cling, crave, flounce.
- 7) Be specific. As William Blake said, "Pay attention to minute particular details." Instead of bug, say tse tse fly. Instead of saying grass, say crabgrass or Kentucky blue. Beware of "the beautiful forest." Enter "the dark chill of spruce shadow."
- 8) Be sparing with adverbs. You can often use a strong verb instead. For instance, instead of saying "she walked quickly," say "she hastened."
- 9) Be precise with adjectives. Using too many can bog down the poem.
- 10) Avoid clichés. English has more words than any other language. Use your dictionary and thesaurus. Combine words in new ways. If you find a cliché, try changing one word or one letter to alter it ... for instance, instead of the low curve of her back, make it the slow curve of her back.
- 11) Use concrete words instead of abstract words. Of course your poem is about love, anger, fear, hate and all those big picture words. But the poem sings when you write about dandelions, muskrats, chipped tea cups and sewer sludge.
- 12) Get the title right. This is the lead in for the reader. You want to use it as an invitation and as a key for understanding the poem. It should have a conversation with the poem instead of just being a label ... instead of "Confession," how about "The Day I Fell in Love with Dr. Suess." Which poem would you rather read?
- 13) Open strong. Sometimes the first few lines of the poem can be cut ... they were what got us into the poem, but the poem itself doesn't need them.
- 14) End strong. Does it feel like an ending? Have we arrived somewhere? If you read it aloud, would people know when to clap? Please don't sum it all up or state the obvious. End hauntingly, so that readers want to read it again.
- 15) Read it out loud. Again and again.



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16) Punctuate it so others can access it easily.

If you do try these exercises, I'd love to see what you have written. Please email me your work at rosemerry@wordwoman.com.

Poet and presenter Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer is the author of If You Listen, a three-time award winning book of poetry, editor of Charity: True Stories of Giving and Receiving, and leads TAG: You're It seminars on creativity, positive attitude and finding purpose. Visit her at www.wordwoman.com.