

# HOW TO GIVE CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

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# How to Give Constructive Criticism: 6 Helpful Tips



(Image: [Tim Jagenberg](#))

*“People seldom refuse help, if one offers it in the right way.”  
- A. C. Benson.*

Have you ever given suggestions that were subsequently ignored?

Have you ever given critiques that were not well received?

Have you ever wanted to give constructive criticism on something, but held back from doing so because you did not know how to convey your intentions across?

## How to Give Constructive Criticism in 6 Steps

**Today's guide is on how to give constructive criticism to someone.** Whether at work or in relationships, sharing and receiving feedback is part and parcel of improvement. If you have ideas on how someone can improve, don't hold your ideas back — rather, share your criticism constructively.

Of course, to be sensitive to others' emotions at the same time and only offer feedback when you feel the other person is ready to take it — otherwise, you may come across as imposing your opinions on others, especially if you repeatedly tell others what to do without them asking you for your thoughts.

### 1. Use the Feedback Sandwich method

The feedback sandwich method is a popular method of giving constructive criticism. It is often used in Toastmasters and in the corporate environment. I refer to the feedback sandwich as PIP, which stands for Positive-Improvement-Positive. I know there are people who use PIP to represent Praise-Improve-Praise which is different from my version of PIP. Read on.

With **Positive-Improve-Positive**, your feedback is broken down into 3 segments:

1. You start off by focusing on the strengths — what you like about the item in question.
2. Then, you provide the criticism — things you don't like, the areas of improvement.
3. Lastly, you round off the feedback with (a) a reiteration of the positive comments you gave at the start and (b) the positive results that can be expected if the criticism is acted upon.

It's called the "feedback sandwich" because you wedge your criticism between an opening and an ending — like a patty wedged between two buns.

Here's an example: you want to critique someone on their website. Here's how PIP can be used:

- 1) First layer, "P" for Positive, where you talk about what you like:
  - "Great website! I love the overall layout and how user-friendly it is. The overall design is nice and pleasing to the eye, and consistent with your brand. The menu is very accessible and makes it easy to access your site sections. I found the intro video helpful in giving me an overview of what you do."
- 2) Second layer, "I" for Improve, where you talk about the areas of improvement:
  - "However, I thought that there are two things that can be better. Firstly, there is a lot of content in the sidebar that clutters up the usage experience. Perhaps if the sidebar content can be narrowed down to the key things, it would make it easier to navigate. Secondly, the font size is too small for me. I found it hard to read as I had to keep squinting."

- 3) Last layer, "P" for Positive, where you reiterate the positive points and the positive results to be expected when the improvement areas are worked on:
  - "Overall, great work. I love what you've done with the design, layout, and intro video. I think if the sidebar clutter can be removed and the font size can be increased, it'd really create a fantastic usage experience for any visitor."

The feedback sandwich is a good framework for providing constructive criticism because by starting off with the positive comments (the first "P"), **you let the receiver know that you are on his/her side and you are not there to attack him/her**. You are also recognizing things that the receiver is doing right, rather than only talking about the issue areas which can come across as being rude — especially if both of you don't really know each other to begin with. The receiver then becomes more receptive to your critique (the "I" in PIP).

After sharing the things you don't like or feel can be improved, round off the criticism with more positive points (the last "P"). This helps your critique end off on a high note, rather than leaving the recipient with a sour taste in his/her mouth. It also reminds him/her what he/she is doing right and reinforces the benefits of acting on your critique.

The feedback sandwich method is most appropriate when you are giving criticism to people you don't know or don't know well.

Otherwise you may come across as very aggressive and **rude** if you just jump right into the critique. This is especially true in the Asian culture. Over time though, you can go right into the critique if you have established a rapport with the recipient and

he/she is familiar with the way you think.

Some people may dislike using the feedback sandwich as they think it's silly to praise for the sake of it. But the point of the feedback sandwich isn't to give false praise or to butter people up. People are often quick to criticize, judge, or **even shame**, and it downplays what others are doing well and the effort they have put into their work. I see the feedback sandwich as a great way to (a) **practice emotional generosity**, because we sure can work on being more generous in supporting people's hard work, (b) help the person learn what he/she is doing well, and (c) use this as the foundation to share what can be improved on.

## 2. Focus on the situation, not the person



(Image: **Pink Sherbet**)

Constructive criticism focuses on the situation, not the person.

## Example #1: Giving feedback on a person's presentation style

- **Bad example:** "You're really boring. You kept going on and on about a certain point even though we were running behind time; it made me want to fall asleep!" — While perhaps said with good intentions to help the person improve (though **overly critical here, ouch**), this is not exactly constructive criticism. It makes a personal attack and makes it seem like he/she is the problem.
- **Good example:** [Apply the feedback sandwich first where you insert context and talk about the good points. Then, move on to the critique.] "... however, I thought some of the points could be delivered in a more concise manner. For example, the presentation allotted time is 30 minutes but we went over time by about 10 minutes, which is one-third of the intended time. Since there were 5 points, perhaps we could allocate 5 minutes per point, which would take up 25 minutes for 5 points, and then have 5 minutes left for closing? This would create a presentation that's more well-paced." — The situation is detached from the person. Critique is given on the situation itself.

## Example #2: Giving feedback on a person's character trait

- **Bad example:** "You're always so negative. It's so draining to be around you." — Like Example #1, this feedback makes a personal attack at the person. It also does not tell the person what he/she can do, which makes it unconstructive.
- **Good feedback:** [Insert context first before going into critique.] "... there are times when I was hurt by the comments you made as they were somewhat demeaning. For example, the last time I had a haircut, one of the first things you said was how ugly I looked. That took me by surprise and I felt quite down." — While

- it's tricky to give constructive criticism when it comes to someone's personality, here it is successfully accomplished by separating the person's actions from him/herself. This makes it easy to critique the behavior without offending the person in question.

How to apply this tip:

- **Firstly, detach the situation from the person.** This distinction is crucial. Take the person out of the equation and focus on the behavior / action / situation / issue at hand.
- **Comment on the issue, not the person.** For example, "The clothes are dirty" and not "You are dirty." "The report is late" and not "You are late." "The food is oily" and not "You are a bad cook."
- **Don't make personal attacks.** Comments like "I'm so sick and tired of..." or "You're so stupid / negative / lazy / unorganized / " come across as accusatory. Stay away from attacks.
- **Don't use active voice; use passive voice.** Example of active voice vs. passive voice: "You gave a bad presentation." vs. "The presentation you gave was bad." Notice that the passive voice shifts the attention away from the person and brings it to the subject matter.
- **Share how it affects you.** Rather than go on and on about how bad the thing is, share how it affects you. This shifts the focus away from the person and onto yourself, which lets the person take a step back to evaluate the situation. It also gives him/her insight to where you are coming from.



### 3. Be specific with your feedback



(Image: [Joe Duty](#))

The third tip to providing constructive criticism is to be specific.

I receive a lot of feedback in running PE. The more specific someone is when giving the feedback, the more actionable it is for me. Here is an example of a vague vs. specific feedback:

- **Vague:** "Hey Celes, I'd love it if you can write some articles on communication."
- **Specific:** "Hey Celes, don't know if you're taking suggestions but if you do, I'd love some advice on public speaking."

The first feedback is very broad — "communication" is a very general topic. While I can identify some subtopics under communication like "networking," "[body language](#)," "[small talk](#)," and

"public speaking," the subtopics that I choose may not be what the reader really wants.

With the second feedback, it is more actionable because it is so specific. It tells me right away that "Hey, there's a request for public speaking articles," after which I can then plan for an article or series on public speaking. There is no confusion.

That's not to say that vague feedback is stupid or bad. It's just that specific feedback helps me understand the user's needs more easily, which makes it easy for me to serve his/her request.

Likewise, it's the same for you — if you want very actionable outcomes, if you want people to help you in a more targeted way, give specific vs. vague feedback. Specific feedback that doesn't target the person as I shared in tip #2.

Here is another example of vague vs. specific feedback. Say you're giving feedback on a report:

- **Vague:** "Good effort on the report but I don't like it. I think there is room to be better." — This feedback is hardly constructive. What do you mean by "don't like it"? "Like" and "dislike" are subjective words. Unless objective criteria is used, it's hard for the person to decipher what is the problem.
- **Specific:** "Good effort but there are some things which can be improved - namely, (a) the formatting and (b) the report conclusions. The formatting is not standardized - there are some parts that uses Arial and other parts that use Times New Roman. In a formal report, it is best to standardize the font. For the report conclusions, the ideas are good but they are too brief, especially ideas #1 and #3. The management would need more data to make their assessment." — Great feedback that is specific. It tells

- the receiver the key problem areas, why they are problem areas, and specific incidences where they appear.

Here's how to make your feedback specific and hence actionable:

1. **Focus more on objective points than subjective opinions.**

Just saying "I don't like it" is not helpful. On the other hand, stating the specific things you do not like, is helpful.

2. **Break your feedback down into key points.** Don't give your feedback as one big lump. Break it down into various key points, then give your feedback point by point.

3. **Give specific examples of each point.** What are the exact situations or examples where the person exhibits the behaviors you highlighted in #2? Point them out. There is no need to highlight every single example - just pointing out 1-2 key examples per point will be sufficient. The intention here is to (a) bring the person's awareness to things which he/she may be oblivious about and (b) illustrate what you mean.

## 4. Comment on things that are actionable



(Image: [Pink Sherbet](#))

The whole point of giving feedback is to help the person improve.

Hence talk about things which the person *can* do something about, rather than things that are out of his/her control. Critiquing the former makes your criticism constructive; critiquing the latter just makes the person feel bad because he/she can't do anything about it, even if he/she wants to. While you can make points on latter especially if they are very crucial, balance things out by talking about things he/she *can* control.

Let's illustrate this with an example. Say your friend is in a singing competition and she has entered the finals. She asks you to critique

her performance. Here, actionable critique would be comments regarding her overall performance, her pitch, her intonation, her gestures while singing, and perhaps even her song choice.

On the other hand, talking about how her voice is too husky/low probably isn't too helpful because it's not something she can change; if she can get into the finals, it probably isn't a real "issue" to begin with. Not only that, such a feedback is highly subjective. There are people who like husky voices just as there are others who prefer other kinds of voices. While you can point out things you don't like (say if you find her voice too husky), making it the center of your critique probably isn't going to be very helpful for your friend's preparation.

In another example, say your friend just set up a new restaurant. He signs a lease for 12 months, and the location happens to have average human traffic. He then approaches you for advice to market his restaurant.

Saying things like "change the location of your restaurant" really isn't helpful at all, because the lease has already been signed. You can point out that location is critical and you'd recommend that he consider places with high human traffic for his next branch or if he's open to changing his restaurant location before the lease ends, but focusing all your time to bash his "poor" location choice isn't really going to help. Other unactionable critique includes saying that he should change his restaurant name or the decor *especially* if they have already been finalized *and* your critique is only based on subjective thoughts vs. hard data. On the other hand, actionable critique would be to "invite food bloggers for food tasting," "do a media launch," "give time-sensitive promotional discounts," and "place advertisements in lifestyle magazines."

Knowing what's actionable and unactionable requires you to be empathetic. Understand the person's situation and his/her objectives, then provide your critique based on that.

## 5. Give recommendations on how to improve

When all is said and done, give recommendations on what the person can do to improve.

Firstly, your recommendations will tie up your critique in a nice bow. Everyone has varying perspectives, which means every critique can be interpreted in different ways. Giving recommendations will give the person a clear idea of what you have in mind. Secondly, recommendations provide a strong call-to-action. You want the person to act on what you have shared, not procrastinate.

With your recommendations, I recommend to (a) be specific with your suggestions and (b) briefly explain the rationale behind the recommendation.

**Example:** Giving feedback on a presentation

- **Weak recommendation:** "The presentation is too long. Make it shorter." — Not very helpful. Reducing the presentation time can be done via many ways — cutting down the points, removing examples, talking faster, and so on. What exactly do you mean? Part of giving constructive criticism includes being specific (see Tip #3).
- **Good recommendation:** "Instead of 2-3 examples per point which detracts from the main message, limit 1 example to each point. This way, the presentation is more succinct and impactful. Doing this, the presentation length will easily be reduced from 30 minutes to 20 minutes." — Great recommendation that is specific.

- Rationale is also provided which explains your point of view to the person.

## 6. Don't make assumptions

My final tip for giving constructive criticism is not to make assumptions. When providing criticism, do so within what you know as fact about the person and the subject. There's no need to make any assumptions. Not only does it make the person look bad, it also makes you look bad — especially when your assumption is wrong.

Here are 3 examples to highlight the difference between an assumption and a critique/comment:

**Example #1** on public speaking:

- **Criticism:** “The speech was mediocre. The speaker appeared nervous and was not able to lead the audience.”
- **Assumption:** “The speaker never had any public speaking experience.” This is an assumption and is not necessarily true. Seasoned public speakers can be nervous when giving speeches, especially in an new environment. To assume that someone doesn't have any public speaking experience just because he/she appears nervous is quite pompous.

## Example #2 on accents:

- **Observation:** “This person speaks with an accent I’m not familiar with.”
- **Assumption:** “This person is not a native English speaker.” Not necessary true. Just because you don't recognize the accent or you can't understand it as well doesn't mean that English isn't the person's native language — it just means that you aren't familiar with the accent. In my experience, I find that people who are less traveled tend to think that anyone who doesn't speak with an American accent is not a native English speaker, when there are many developed countries where English *is* their first language and the citizens are bilingual or trilingual.

## Example #3 on someone’s behavior:

- **Observation:** “The new colleague seems to be **anxious** when around male co-workers. She keeps fidgeting and she’s not able to articulate herself well.”
- **Assumption:** “The person was brought up in an all-girls environment.” Assumption. This is not necessarily true. Anxiety around the opposite gender can happen to anyone.

As they say, when you assume, you make an "ASS out of U and ME." Not having a presumptuous attitude will go a long way in any communication, not just in giving criticism.



# Further Reading

Check out the following related content:

- [Facing Negative Criticism? 5 Tips to Deal with Negative Criticism \[Video\]](#)
- [8 Helpful Ways To Deal With Critical People](#)
- [8 Tips to Tackle Naysayers](#)
- [How to Be Assertive Without Being Aggressive \[PEP009\]](#)
- [Be a Better Me in 30 Days Program - Day 14: Get Feedback from Others](#)
- [Be a Better Me in 30 Days Program - Day 15: Reflect on a Criticism](#)
- Get the manifesto version of this article: [\[Manifesto\] Constructive Criticism](#)

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