

This is a checklist which we use in our Creative Writing in commenting on our own and other peoples work. We thought you might find it useful in your own reading. It was written by Mrs Judith Williams a former member of Harborne and Edgbaston U3A and a founder member of the group.

It is important that we offer each other constructive criticism, not destructive in a way that would discourage or offend, but not totally bland either, or no-one will learn how to improve their work. It is just as important that we study our own work carefully before the meeting, and try to improve it as much as possible. The following notes give some idea of the topics we shall cover and the considerations we should apply. Note that they are designed mainly for short stories, but much applies to memoirs and longer works, adapted appropriately. They are not designed for poetry, unless you are aiming to follow in Homer's footsteps and write an epic.

Opening

Does it catch the attention? Is it intriguing, making you want to read on? Does it create a mood or atmosphere? If none of these, how could it be improved?

Characters

Is the main character strongly drawn? Do you believe in him/her? Do you have a strong emotional response to, or identify with, him/her? Does the writer make clear his motivation?

How about the lesser characters? Do they seem real, or just stereotypes? Does it matter?

Do you have the right number of characters for the length of the piece, or is it too crowded?

Dialogue

Is it appropriate in style and idiom for the character who is speaking?

Does it flow easily, or is it stilted and awkward?

Does it contribute to the progress of the narrative? If not, what is its purpose? Does it help to delineate the speaker? Is it designed to break up a long passage of narrative which might otherwise become tedious?

Point of view

Has the writer kept to the point of view of the main character? Or to that of a narrator or observer? Or has the viewpoint dodged about from one character to another? If the latter, has this damaged the flow or impact of the story, or confused the reader?

Plot/Theme

Does the work have a plot or a theme, or both? What exactly is it about (i.e. its theme, e.g. sibling rivalry; moral choices)?

Does anything actually happen? Does it deal with a moment of change? Is there a problem or conflict to resolve, and is this achieved? Is there a satisfactory climax?

Is the plot/theme memorable, original, a familiar one? If the latter, is it handled with freshness and originality? Is it life-changing?

Is it believable, or does it strain credulity? Does it rely too much on co-incidence?

Is the plot appropriate for the length of the piece, or is it too complex to be dealt with adequately within your word limit, if any?

Does the action take place within a limited time-span? If not, is there justification for breaking this generally accepted rule?

Action and pace

Does the action move at a satisfactory pace? Has the writer included all the essential information, or else included far too much, slowing the action?

Has the writer kept control, and varied the pace to provide faster and slower passages?

Is the story told by a narrator, or in pictures you can visualise, like a film? Which would be more appropriate to the piece, or more memorable?

Language & style

Is the style appropriate for the subject? Does the work flow easily or is it strained? Is there any original, striking use of language?

Is the tense (past or present) and person (1st, 2nd or 3rd) consistent throughout? If not, is there a clear reason for any change, and is it justified?

Ending

Is it appropriate? Does it satisfy or disappoint you? If there are loose ends, are these intriguing or irritating? If not satisfactory, how could it be improved?

If there is a twist to the ending, has the writer planted clues which the reader can pick up, so that the twist is not altogether "out of the blue"?

Title

Does it fit the story? Did it make you want to read the piece?

Overall impression

Did you enjoy the piece? Did it capture and hold your attention? Was it interesting, amusing, emotive, distressing (in a good or bad way), thought provoking, unusual, run-of-the mill, gripping, entertaining? Was there enough/too much information?