

# THE ART OF CRITIQUE

SOME SIMPLE GUIDELINES

---

## THE SWEET 16

CRITIQUING THE FIRST PAGE OF A NOVEL

Chris Mandeville

# Critique Groups

The idea is simple:

you work with another person, or people,  
sharing your work and  
providing feedback intended  
to help each other improve your work

# Why So Many Horror Stories?

- Expectations
- Courtesy
- Communication

# Expectations

What critique is:

- safe
- constructive criticism
- learning opportunity

What it's NOT:

- ego boosting
- soap box
- line editing

# Editing & Revision

Revising

to get the *story* right

Editing

to get the *writing* right

# Expectations

make expectations clear, explicit, and agreed upon

# Courtesy

- do your homework
- submit
- be on time
- give the work due attention
- be polite
- be gentle and kind

# Communication

- make it the norm
- have a forum for complaints
- don't save it up
- keep language positive
- choose words carefully
- don't blame
- listen
- praise and compliment

# Rules of Engagement

## Critiquers:

- Sandwich with PRAISE
- Condense to ESSENTIALS
- Keep language POSITIVE
- Don't make it YOURS
- Focus on the WORK

## Critiquees:

- During critique LISTEN
- Don't take it PERSONALLY
- Don't ARGUE or DEFEND
- Treat it as a GIFT
- The story is YOURS

# THE ART OF CRITIQUE

SOME SIMPLE GUIDELINES

---

## THE SWEET 16

CRITIQUING THE FIRST PAGE OF A NOVEL

# **THE SWEET 16**

When a novel is formatted in  
“Standard Manuscript Format”  
there are 16 lines on the first page.

These are arguably the most important lines  
in your novel because if they don't get the  
reader to turn the page, the reader will never  
see the rest of your work.

# GOALS OF A FIRST PAGE

- Engages the reader
- Grounds the reader
- Makes the reader want to turn the page

# GOALS OF A FIRST PAGE

Get your reader asking questions--

- What is your reader wondering?
- What is your reader worried about?
- What will they turn the page to find out

# FIRST PAGE ELEMENTS:

- **Character**
- **Setting**
- **Plot/Conflict**
- Tension
- Voice
- Genre
- Hook
- Great first line?

# THE HUNGER GAMES by Suzanne Collins

## Chapter One

When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold. My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim's warmth but finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress. She must have had bad dreams and climbed in with our mother. Of course, she did. This is the day of the reaping.

I prop myself up on one elbow. There's enough light in the bedroom to see them. My little sister, Prim, curled up on her side, cocooned in my mother's body, their cheeks pressed together. In sleep, my mother looks younger, still worn but not so beaten-down. Prim's face is as fresh as a raindrop, as lovely as the primrose for which she was named. My mother was very beautiful once, too. Or so they tell me.

Sitting at Prim's knees, guarding her, is the world's ugliest cat. Mashed-in nose, half of one ear missing, eyes the color of rotting squash. Prim named him Buttercup, insisting that his muddy yellow coat matched the bright flower. He hates me. Or at least distrusts me. Even though it was years ago, I think he still remembers how I tried to drown him in a bucket when Prim brought him home. Scrawny kitten, belly swollen with worms, crawling with fleas. The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed. But Prim begged so hard, cried even, I had to let him stay. It turned out okay. My mother got rid of the vermin and he's a born mouser. Even catches the occasional rat. Sometimes, when I clean a kill, I feed Buttercup the entrails. He has stopped hissing at me.

# CHARACTER (direct)

## Chapter One

When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold. **My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim's** warmth but finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress. She must have had bad dreams and climbed in with our mother. Of course, she did. This is the day of the reaping.

I prop myself up on one elbow. There's enough light in the bedroom to see them. My little sister, Prim, curled up on her side, cocooned in my mother's body, their cheeks pressed together. In sleep, my mother looks younger, still worn but not so beaten-down. Prim's face is as fresh as a raindrop, as lovely as the primrose for which she was named. My mother was very beautiful once, too. Or so they tell me.

Sitting at Prim's knees, guarding her, is the world's ugliest cat. Mashed-in nose, half of one ear missing, eyes the color of rotting squash. Prim named him Buttercup, insisting that his muddy yellow coat matched the bright flower. He hates me. Or at least distrusts me. Even though it was years ago, I think he still remembers how **I tried to drown him** in a bucket when Prim brought him home. Scrawny kitten, belly swollen with worms, crawling with fleas. **The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed.** But Prim begged so hard, cried even, **I had to let him stay.** It turned out okay. My mother got rid of the vermin and he's a born mouser. Even catches the occasional rat. **Sometimes, when I clean a kill, I feed Buttercup the entrails.** He has stopped hissing at me.

# CHARACTER (indirect)

## Chapter One

When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold. **My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim's** warmth but finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress. She must have had bad dreams and climbed in with our mother. Of course, she did. This is the day of the reaping.

*I prop myself up on one elbow. There's enough light in the bedroom to see them. My little sister, Prim, curled up on her side, cocooned in my mother's body, their cheeks pressed together. In sleep, my mother looks younger, still worn but not so beaten-down. Prim's face is as fresh as a raindrop, as lovely as the primrose for which she was named. My mother was very beautiful once, too. Or so they tell me.*

Sitting at Prim's knees, guarding her, is the world's ugliest cat. Mashed-in nose, half of one ear missing, eyes the color of rotting squash. Prim named him Buttercup, insisting that his muddy yellow coat matched the bright flower. *He hates me. Or at least distrusts me.* Even though it was years ago, I think he still remembers how **I tried to drown him** in a bucket when Prim brought him home. Scrawny kitten, belly swollen with worms, crawling with fleas. **The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed.** *But Prim begged so hard, cried even, I had to let him stay.* It turned out okay. My mother got rid of the vermin and he's a born mouser. Even catches the occasional rat. **Sometimes, when I clean a kill, I feed Buttercup the entrails.** *He has stopped hissing at me.*

# SETTING

## Chapter One

When I **wake up**, the other side of the **bed is cold**. My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim's warmth but finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress. She must have had bad dreams and climbed in with our mother. Of course, she did. This is the day of the reaping.

I prop myself up on one elbow. There's **enough light in the bedroom** to see them. My little sister, Prim, curled up on her side, cocooned in my mother's body, their cheeks pressed together. In sleep, my mother looks younger, still worn but not so beaten-down. Prim's face is as fresh as a raindrop, as lovely as the primrose for which she was named. My mother was very beautiful once, too. Or so they tell me.

Sitting at Prim's knees, guarding her, is the world's ugliest cat. Mashed-in nose, half of one ear missing, eyes the color of rotting squash. Prim named him Buttercup, insisting that his muddy yellow coat matched the bright flower. He hates me. Or at least distrusts me. Even though it was years ago, I think he still remembers how I tried to drown him in a bucket when Prim brought him home. Scrawny kitten, belly swollen with worms, crawling with fleas. **The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed**. But Prim begged so hard, cried even, I had to let him stay. It turned out okay. My mother got rid of the **vermin** and he's a born mouser. Even catches the occasional rat. Sometimes, **when I clean a kill**, I feed Buttercup the entrails. He has stopped hissing at me.

# PLOT/CONFLICT & HOOK

## Chapter One

When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold. My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim's warmth but finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress. She must have had bad dreams and climbed in with our mother. Of course, she did. **This is the day of the reaping.**

I prop myself up on one elbow. There's enough light in the bedroom to see them. My little sister, Prim, curled up on her side, cocooned in my mother's body, their cheeks pressed together. In sleep, my mother looks younger, still worn but not so beaten-down. Prim's face is as fresh as a raindrop, as lovely as the primrose for which she was named. My mother was very beautiful once, too. Or so they tell me.

Sitting at Prim's knees, guarding her, is the world's ugliest cat. Mashed-in nose, half of one ear missing, eyes the color of rotting squash. Prim named him Buttercup, insisting that his muddy yellow coat matched the bright flower. He hates me. Or at least distrusts me. Even though it was years ago, I think he still remembers how I tried to drown him in a bucket when Prim brought him home. Scrawny kitten, belly swollen with worms, crawling with fleas. The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed. But Prim begged so hard, cried even, I had to let him stay. It turned out okay. My mother got rid of the vermin and he's a born mouser. Even catches the occasional rat. Sometimes, when I clean a kill, I feed Buttercup the entrails. He has stopped hissing at me.

## BRIDGING CONFLICT

According to Donald Maass in  
*Writing the Breakout Novel*:

“the temporary conflict  
or mini-problem  
or interim worry  
that makes  
opening material matter”

# BRIDGING CONFLICT

## **The Golden Compass by Philip Pullman**

is about Lyra's journey to the Arctic to find her missing friend, Roger, rescue her uncle, and learn about terrible experiments being conducted on children that involve something called Dust.

# THE GOLDEN COMPASS by Philip Pullman

## One: The Decanter of Tokay

Lyra and her daemon moved through the darkening hall, taking care to keep to one side, out of sight of the kitchen. The three great tables that ran the length of the hall were laid already, the silver and the glass catching what little light there was, and the long benches were pulled out ready for the guests. Portraits of former Masters hung high up in the gloom along the walls. Lyra reached the dais and looked back at the kitchen door, and, seeing no one, stepped up beside the high table. The places were laid with gold, not silver, and the fourteen seats were not oak benches but mahogany chairs with velvet cushions.

Lyra stopped beside the Master's chair and flicked the biggest glass gently with a fingernail. The sound rang clearly through the hall.

"You're not taking this seriously," whispered her daemon. "Behave yourself."

Her daemon's name was Pantalaimon, and he was currently in the form of a moth, a dark brown one so as not to show up in the darkness of the hall.

"They're making too much noise to hear from the kitchen," Lyra whispered back. "And the Steward doesn't come in till the first bell. Stop fussing."

But she put her palm over the ringing crystal anyway, and Pantalaimon fluttered ahead and through the slightly open door of the Retiring Room at the other end of the dais.

**The bridging conflict: *will she be caught?***

**This relates thematically to the overall conflict in the novel.**

# FIRST PAGE ELEMENTS:

- **Character**
- **Setting**
- **Plot/Conflict**
- Tension
- Voice
- Genre
- Hook
- Great first line?

# PRACTICE CRITIQUE

- Read the first page of a novel
- Look for the first page elements
- Think **story** not **wording**
- Look for things you like
- Look for things you think could be improved

# THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA by Lauren Weisberger

The light hadn't even officially turned green at the intersection of 17<sup>th</sup> and Broadway before an army of overconfident yellow cabs roared past the tiny deathtrap I was attempting to navigate around the city streets. *Clutch, gas, shift* (neutral to first? Or first to second?), *release clutch*, I repeated over and over in my head, the mantra offering little comfort and even less direction amid the screeching midday traffic. The little car bucked wildly twice before it lurched forward through the intersection. My heart flip-flopped in my chest. Without warning, the lurching evened out and I began to pick up speed. Lots of speed. I glanced down to confirm visually that I was only in second gear, but the rear end of a cab loomed so large in the windshield that I could do nothing but jam my foot on the brake pedal so hard that my heel snapped off. Shit! Another pair of seven-hundred-dollar shoes sacrificed to my complete and utter lack of grace under pressure: this clocked in as my third such breakage this month. It was almost a relief when the car stalled (I'd obviously forgotten to press the clutch when attempting to brake for my life). I had a few seconds—peaceful seconds if one could overlook the angry honking and varied forms of the word “fuck” being hurled at me from all directions—to pull off my Manolos and toss them into the passenger seat. There was nowhere to wipe my sweaty hands except for the suede Gucci pants that hugged my thighs and hips so tightly they'd both begun to tingle within minutes of my securing the final button. My fingers left wet streaks across the supple suede that swathed the tops of my now numb thighs. Attempting to drive this \$84,000 stick-shift convertible through the obstacle-fraught streets of midtown at lunchtime pretty much demanded that I smoke a cigarette.

# REMEMBER:

## FIRST PAGE

## CRITIQUE GUIDELINES

---

Character

Setting

Plot/Conflict

Tension

Voice

Genre

Hook

Great first line

Sandwich with PRAISE

Condense to ESSENTIALS

Keep language POSITIVE

Don't make it YOURS

Focus on the WORK

Don't take it PERSONALLY

Remember it's a GIFT

Think ***story*** not ***wording***