

# Critique

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## Understanding Critique

# What is a critique?

Critique is a form of evaluation, intended to improve the quality of creative work. It's both **evaluative** and **generative**:

- A critique evaluates the quality of work by examining it through lenses of quality, usability, comprehension, and other elements of design
- A critique leads to new design solutions as participants display alternatives and iterate on the work that's been developed.

When I make something, it's  
helpful to have other people  
critique it.

**Iteration**    **Critique**



But often, I view critique as a judgement about myself, instead of about my work.



And if the critique points out things that aren't very good, I hear that I'm not very good. I'm bad.

And so I stop making things.



**BAD!**

**Critique**

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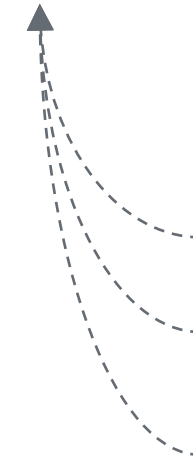
But making things leads to  
critique, and critique makes things  
better.

**Iteration**    **Critique**

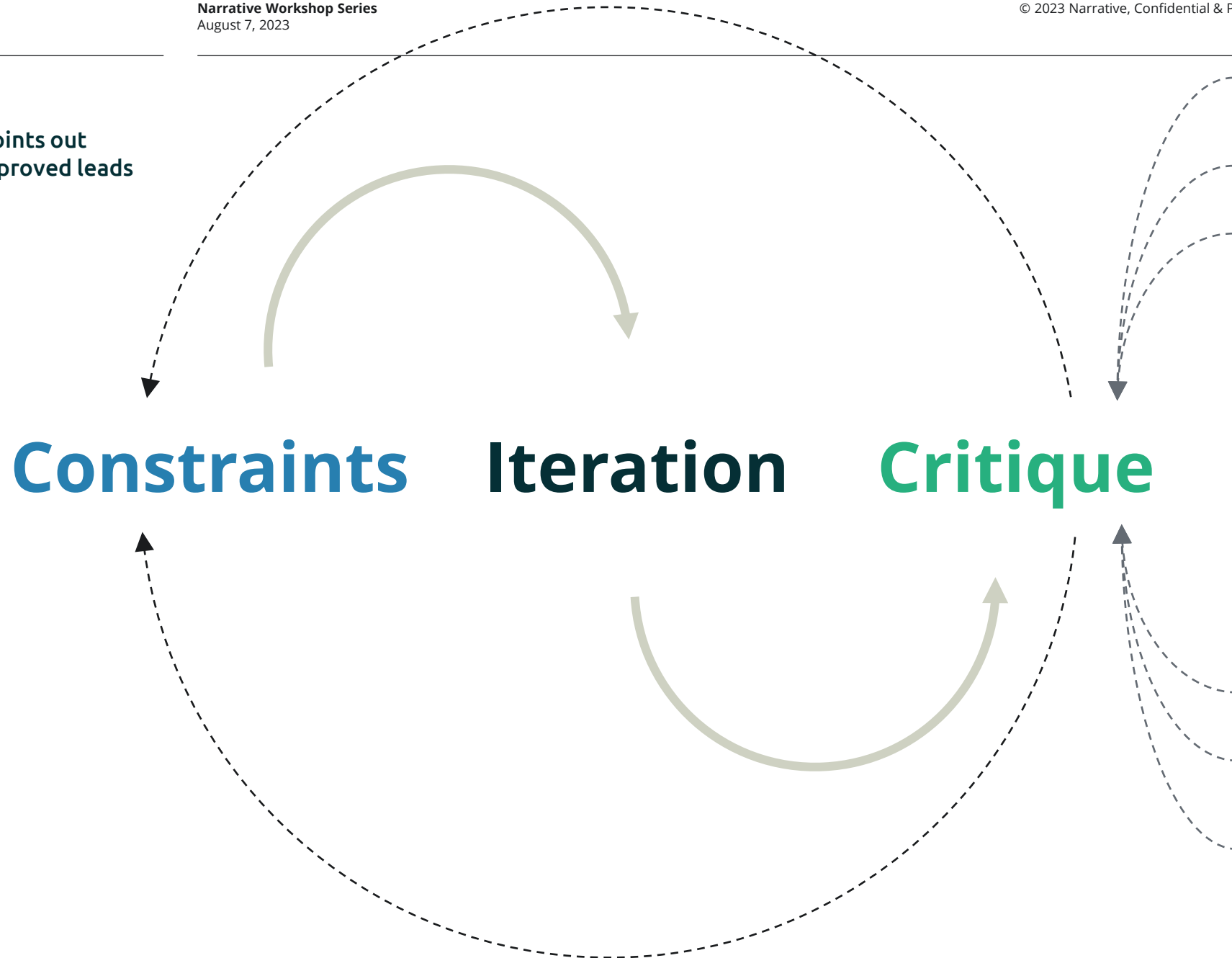


The most important part of a critique is bringing in outside viewpoints and perspectives.

**Iteration**      **Critique**



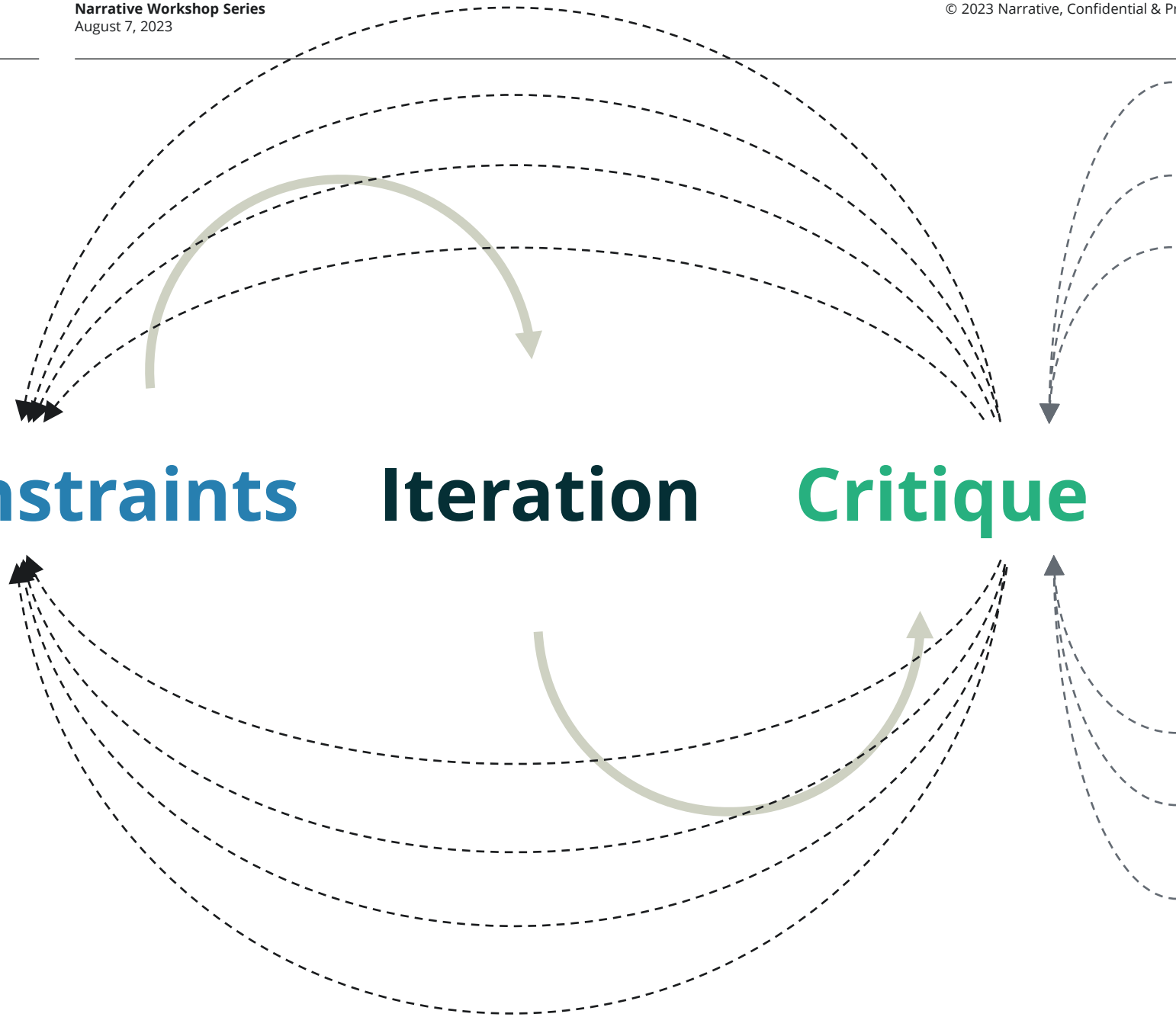
And a critique that points out things that can be improved leads to new constraints.





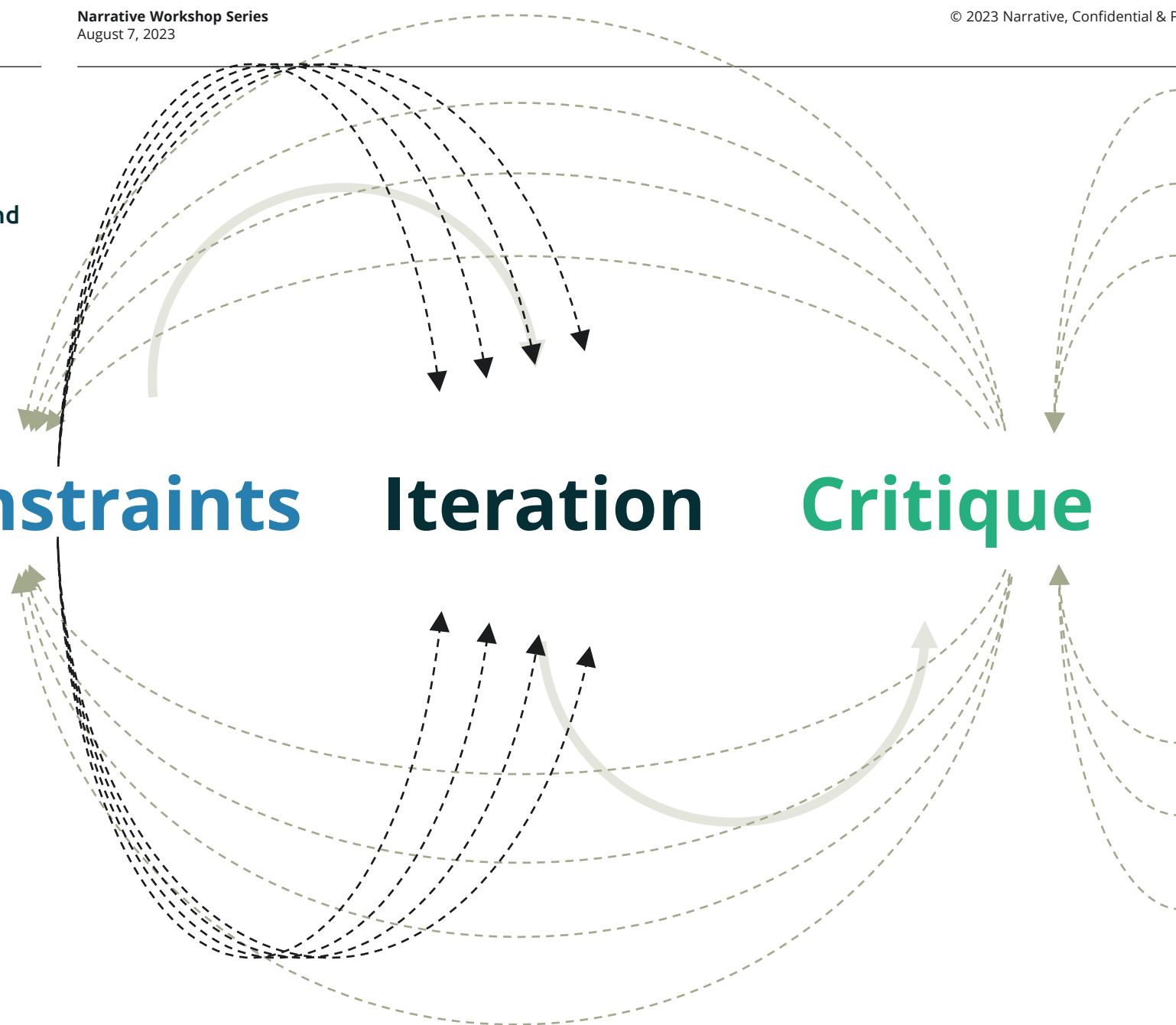
The more critique we have, the more constraints emerge.

**Constraints**   **Iteration**   **Critique**



And those constraints lead to another iteration—a better iteration—which improves the end design.

# Constraints Iteration Critique



The goal of a critique is to establish new constraints. A good critique points out “bad” parts of a design, but makes the designer feel great.





**“Here is one of the few effective keys to the Design problem: the ability of the Designer to recognize as many of the constraints as possible; his willingness and enthusiasm for working within these constraints.”**

— Charles Eames, Designer

*This is the problem we are trying to solve.*

## Understanding Critique

# How to run a critique

1. Develop an iteration of the work product
2. Gather the critiquing group
3. Articulate the rules
4. Visually display the work (printed on the wall, or visualized on a display)
5. Articulate the problem the group is trying to solve
6. Walk through the work in a scenario or story
7. Discuss and debate
8. Sketch improvements (or document the recommendation)

## Understanding Critique

# 1. Develop an iteration of the work product.

Critique fundamentally requires “a thing to be critiqued.” Although this is typically focused on a visual design, such as a comp or brand exploration, critique can be applied to:

1. Experiences
2. Business Strategy
3. Operational Models

To critique these less visual ideas, it’s critical to develop a visualization of the non-visual idea. This often takes the form of a diagram, showing how different ideas interact with one-another.

The diagram does not need to be aesthetically pleasing if the critique is of the idea itself. It simply needs to communicate effectively.

*Critique ideas early, rather than waiting until they are “polished” or “done.”*



## Understanding Critique

# 2. Gather the critiquing group.

A quality critique includes between 4-6 people, all with deep and intimate understanding of the subject matter. This form of engagement does not work if someone has just learned about the project, or if they have only a vague understanding of the design.

Critique should be held in a comfortable environment, one where people feel at ease about sharing. Formal critique should not happen at someone's desk.

*Include a diverse set of perspectives, in order to generate new and unexpected ways of thinking about old problems.*

## Understanding Critique

# 3. Articulate the rules.

Critique is formal, and has formal rules associated with it. These rules should be verbally articulated so that everyone understands them. The rules are:

1. Critique the work, not the person. This should be focused exclusively on the work product.
2. Do not defend the work; instead, gather feedback and evaluate it later.
3. Timebox critique; after a set amount of time, move on, irrespective of if the critique is completed or not.
4. Negative critique must be accompanied by a suggestion for improvement.

*Once you state the rules,  
make sure you enforce them  
by calling attention to people  
when they break them.*

## Understanding Critique

# 4. Visually display the work.

Print the work, and put it on the wall. When work is on the wall, people can see both the breadth and depth at once. Most work can be externalized:

1. Print interaction design solutions (wireframes) and put them in a scenario flow
2. Print visual design large, so it can be seen from far away
3. Print diagrammatic representations of strategy
4. Print storyboards of videos or motion studies

*When work is on the wall,  
people can see both the  
breadth and depth at once.  
Leave the work on the wall  
after the critique to draw  
people in and encourage  
curiosity.*

## Understanding Critique

# 5. Articulate the problem the group is trying to solve.

One of the most important parts of critique is articulating what problem is being solved – being clear and crisp about the boundaries and shape of the problem.

- Display the problem statement in big, bold letters on the wall, so that the team is aware of it.
- Adjust this problem statement as necessary during the critique by crossing out words and re-writing them.
- Iterate on the problem statement in the same way as iterating on the work product.

*The problem statement will change over time; have your team constantly reiterate the problem statement.*

## Understanding Critique

# 6. Walk through the work in a scenario or story.

Whenever talking about creative work, ground the work in a story and narrative. A scenario – a set of steps, rather than a single image of representation – helps people gain empathy with a person or customer, and shifts the conversation from a static artifact to one that is used, considered, and experienced.

To present a story, display work as it would be encountered over time. This may mean presenting more than one image or diagram, and showing how that image or diagram changes.

*Stories capture the imagination, and help ground ideas in an empathetic perspective – one focused on people, rather than business or technology.*

## Understanding Critique

# 7. Discuss and debate.

The “meat” of the critique is a discussion and a debate. The entire purpose of a critique is to identify places for improvement, and so, only providing “positive feedback” is actually harmful – it reinforces poor decisions.

Debate should be structured, and supported by evidence or example. It’s not enough (or appropriate) to say “I don’t like it” – the critique needs to be specific (What don’t you like? Why don’t you like it?) and constructive, by offering suggestions on how to improve it.

Remember, the focus is on the work – not the individual.

*Constructive debate requires trust. Build trust with your team by establishing credibility, supporting them publicly within the organization, and helping them see the relevance of their work.*

## Understanding Critique

# 8. Capture the “things to go explore”.

Critique is a discussion. Participants should evaluate, as a group, a variety of alternative design directions. This means visualizing a variety of paths – showing ways that the design can change.

To sketch :

- Draw on top of the original, using a sharpie or bold marker
- Sketch new ideas on the whiteboard in real time
- Sketch new ideas in a digital tool (such as Photoshop or Illustrator) in real time

*Encourage people who “can’t draw” to sketch ideas, too.*

## Understanding Critique

# If you are critiquing...

If you are in a position where you are offering criticism to someone, follow these guidelines:

- Be direct with your feedback. Don't beat around the bush or otherwise temper your comments; if something doesn't work, say that it doesn't work.
- Be specific. Critique is about details. Identify the unique, small decisions that have been made and your recommended changes.
- Draw your ideas. If you find yourself talking a lot, you are in a place where a sketch can offer more value.
- Ensure you were understood. Ask the other participants if they heard what you said, and have them reiterate your comments.



## Understanding Critique

# If you are being critiqued...

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- Don't explain your work. Offering a rationalization for your design decisions serves to artificially constrain the possibilities for new design ideas.
- Don't defend your work. The critique is intended to identify areas for improvement. Defensiveness short-circuits that valuable feedback process. Remember, you ultimately get to decide to incorporate the feedback or not.
- Write everything down. You won't remember the details later.
- Summarize what you heard. Make sure that you heard things correctly, and affirm to the other participants that you were able to capture the sentiment and content of the critique successfully.

## Understanding Critique

# In summary:

### Process

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# Thank you!

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